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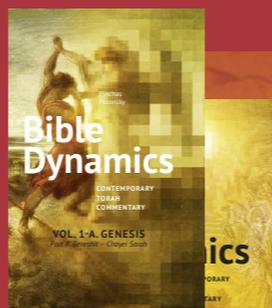


Pinchas Polonsky was born in Moscow in 1958, and from 1975 was active in Russia's religious Jewish underground. After emigrating to Israel in 1987 and settling in Samaria, he continued to study and teach at the Bar Ilan and Ariel universities.

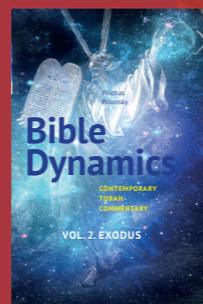
Dr. Polonsky is among the most popular Russian-language authors, having published over twenty books on Jewish practice and philosophy, of which the best known are: *Gates of Prayer*; *Rabbi A. I. Kook*; *The Jewish view on Christianity*; and *Israel and Humanity – a New Stage of Development*.

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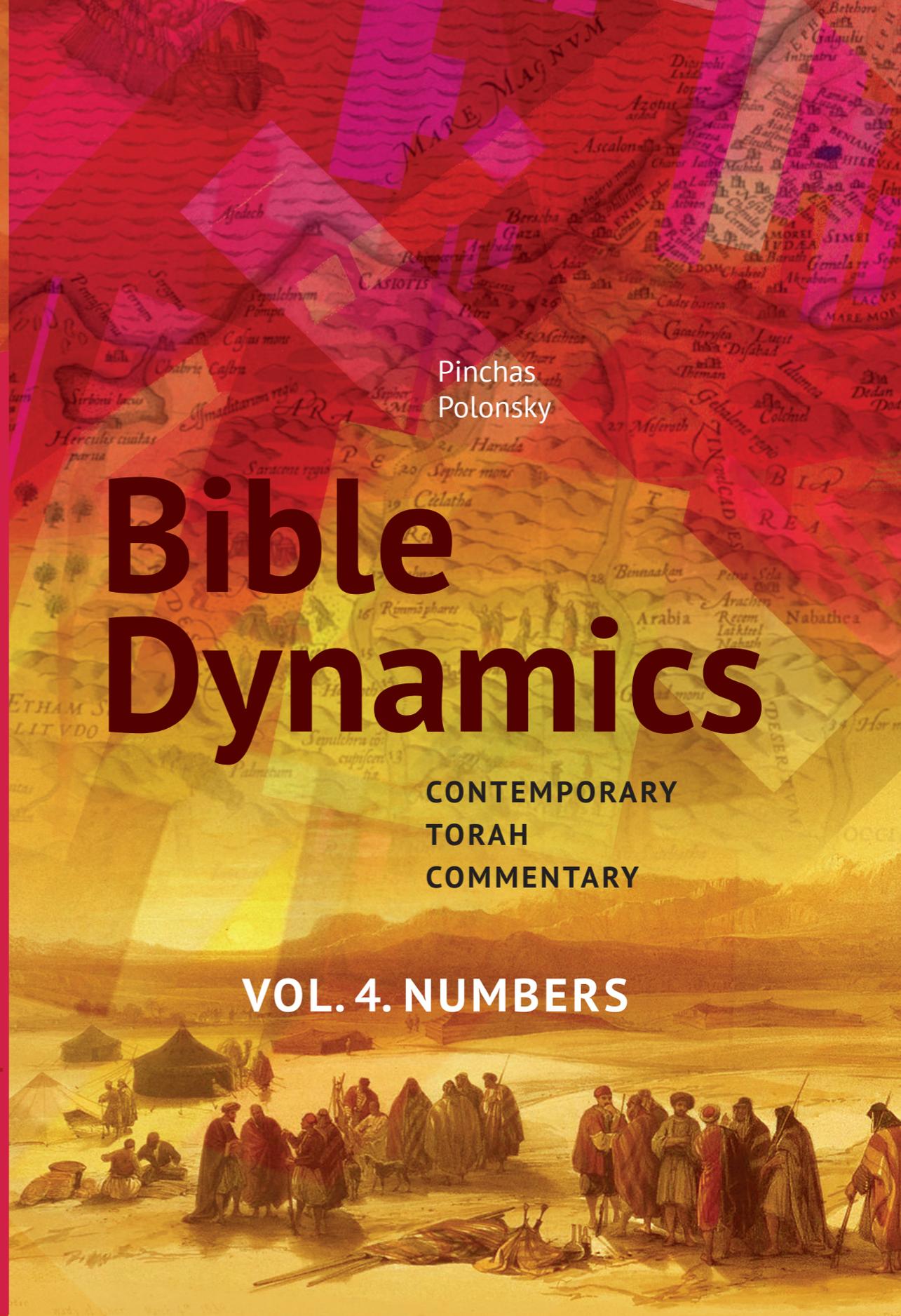
Pinchas  
Polonsky

# Bible Dynamics

CONTEMPORARY  
TORAH  
COMMENTARY

VOL. 4. NUMBERS

Pinchas  
Polonsky



Пинхас Полонский

# Библейская Динамика

Комментарий к Торе

Согласно учению р. Иехуды-Леона Ашкенази (Маниту)  
и р. Ури Шерки

ТОМ 4. ЧИСЛА

פינחס פולונסקי

## אבות בתנועה

ההתפתחותם האישית של אבות האומה

לפי תורתו של הרב המקובל יהודא-ליאון אשכנזי (מניטו)  
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כרך 4. ספר במדבר

**Pinchas Polonsky**

**BIBLE DYNAMICS**  
**Evolving Personalities and Ideas**

**Contemporary Torah Commentary**

**Following the teaching of**  
**Rabbi Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi (Manitou)**  
**and Rabbi Ouri Cherki**

**VOL. 4. NUMBERS**

**Translated from the Russian**  
**by Betzalel (Todd) Shandelman**



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We are very grateful

**to Mikhail Fridman**

for support in translation  
of the "Bible Dynamics" commentary into English



The preface, explaining the particular features and objectives of the Bible Dynamics commentary, can be found in the beginning of volume 1-a.

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*Pinchas Polonsky*



For the complete list of reviews, see  
<http://pinchaspolonsky.org/reviews>

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## § 1. THE BOOK OF NUMBERS: GENERAL OVERVIEW

### § 1.1. THE BOOK OF *BEMIDBAR* (NUMBERS): ITS NAME AND STRUCTURE

As previously mentioned,<sup>1</sup> Jewish tradition has given each of the five books of the Torah two names. One name of each pair reflects the overall theme of the book, and the other corresponds to its opening words. The first of each of those name pairs was later translated into Greek and Latin – and from them into other languages as well – thus becoming established in European culture, while the second name of each pair became standard in Jewish terminology.

In particular, the fourth book of the Torah, which in Hebrew today is usually called *Bemidbar*, “In the Wilderness,” was known in ancient times as *Chumash Ha-Pekudim*, “The Book of the Census,”<sup>2</sup> which in the European tradition became *Numeri*, “Numbers,” or “the book of Numbers.”

Henceforth we refer to the entire book as the book of Numbers, and we use the name *Bemidbar* only to refer to the first of its ten weekly portions. (In each of the five books of the Torah, the first weekly portion bears the same name as the entire book.)

The book of Numbers can be divided into two parts, each consisting of five weekly portions:

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 2.1.

<sup>2</sup> Strictly, the term *chumash*, “a fifth [part],” means any one of the five books of the Torah, “the Pentateuch.” But it is now also used to refer to all five books taken together.

### Part One: The Journey Through the Wilderness

1. *Bemidbar* (1:1-4:20) – The initial census of the people, and setup of the story line.
2. *Naso* (4:21-7:89) – Crises of the individual.
3. *Behaalotecha* (8:1-12:16) – Crises of the Torah (teaching and leadership).
4. *Shelach* (13:1-15:41) – Crises of the Land of Israel (the meaning of the conquest of the Land).
5. *Korach* (16:1-18:32) – Crises of the Jewish nation (establishing the nation's internal structure).

### Part Two: Conquest of the Transjordan

1. *Chukkat* (19:1-22:1) – Standing up to the nations at the military-political level.
2. *Balak* (22:2-25:9) – Standing up to the nations at the spiritual level.
3. *Pinchas* (25:10-30:1) – The final census of the people, and the enumeration of its structure by families.
4. *Mattot* (30:2-32:42) – Restoration after the events of Numbers part 1.
5. *Mas'ei* (33:1-36:13) – Restoration after the events of Numbers part 2.

We have also noted that the book of Exodus, the second book of the Torah, which covers two primary topics – the birth of the Jewish nation after the Exodus, and the commandments given at Mount Sinai – has a dual conclusion:

- (i) The Cloud of Glory hovers over the Tabernacle, preventing anyone from entering.
- (ii) The Cloud then rises and leads the Jewish people on their journey through the wilderness.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 30.5.

Likewise, the book of Exodus has two different continuations, each in its own, later, book:

(i) The continuation of the aspect of the commandments. This is the third book of the Torah, Leviticus, in which God summons Moses to enter the Tabernacle.

(ii) The continuation of the aspect of Jewish history. This is the fourth book of the Torah, the book of Numbers.

## § 1.2. NUMBERS: A BOOK OF WANDERINGS AND OF CRISIS

The book of Numbers is a book of wanderings. The people must journey across the wilderness for forty years in order to be properly transformed.

Even after they had left Egypt, the former slaves to the Egyptians continued to feel and behave like slaves; the generation of the Exodus was therefore also known as the *dor ha midbar*, “the generation of the wilderness.” The adults of that generation perished before reaching the Promised Land. Only their descendants could become a free people and enter the Land of Israel.

We should not imagine, however, that their children, the next generation, would automatically grow up to be a worthy people. Growing up free is not enough. A people can find itself only after experiencing a series of crises that allow it to gain its true freedom and its full sense of responsibility.

In this connection, Rabbi Tzvi Yehudah Kook notes that there is, at it were, the “stationary Torah,” the Torah as it is observed in the home, and the “itinerant Torah,” the Torah of the road. A journey inevitably changes those who follow it. Problems not noticeable in a state of stability often become highlighted and exacerbated as soon as movement begins.

The book of Numbers opens with the themes of census and order, but a litany of problems soon arises. First there are personal crises, followed by social crises: faulty understanding of the Torah, of the Land, of the structure of the people of Israel, and of proper relations with the nations of the world. As we shall see below, each weekly portion of the

book of Numbers is dedicated to one of these crises. Each of these essential components of Jewish identity is examined and corrected in turn.

Having experienced a series of crises at all levels of society, the people are able to rebuild. After all transformations are complete, another census is performed, in weekly portion *Pinchas*, toward the end of the book of Numbers. The Jewish nation can then finally go on to conquer and settle their Land.

Thus, the themes with which the book of Numbers opens and closes – counting and refining the structure of the Jewish nation – can be seen as a pair of “brackets,” as it were, enclosing the book. And the actual content of the book consists of the accounts of the various crises that must be overcome along the way.

### § 1.3. THE BOOK OF THE LEVITES

Each of the five books of the Torah corresponds to a given stratum within the Jewish people:

1. Genesis is the book of the Patriarchs.
2. Exodus is the book of Moses and Aaron.
3. Leviticus is the book of the *kohanim*, “priests.”
4. Numbers is the book of the Levites.
5. Deuteronomy is the book of the Jewish nation as a whole.

Like all the people of the wilderness era, the Levites own no land of their own. This safeguards the people from plunging headlong into materiality. The Levites play a central role in the book of Numbers; the entire story essentially revolves around them. Most notably, they replace the firstborns for the Temple service, and they are associated with the rebellion of Korah. Indeed, it is the responsibility of the tribe of Levi to help the nation in surmounting its crises.

The priests, who are in charge of the Temple, are an aristocracy that considers itself the highest echelon of society. (The descendants of Aaron must uphold special marriage laws, just like the nobility, for whom

this is an accepted fact of life.) And the nation as a whole are farmers, each landowner tied to his allotted tract.

The Levites, however, belong to neither the priestly aristocracy nor the landowner. Their position lies between the nobility and the commonfolk. Having no land of their own, they live in relative poverty.

The Torah repeatedly mentions the Levites alongside “the alien, the orphan, and the widow,” all of the whom, because they have no material support, are always living on the edge of a stable, normal existence. It is precisely this “predisposition to crisis” that gives the Levites their power to heal society.

We wish to note that although the division of the Jewish people into tribes has not survived the vicissitudes of multiple long and trying Jewish exiles, the division of the nation into Priests, Levites, and ordinary Israelites has always been so pivotal in Judaism that it exists among the Jewish people until this very day.



**WEEKLY  
PORTION 1**

**BEMIDBAR**



## § 2. THE NATIONAL CENSUS

### § 2.1. DEPARTING SINAI (1:1)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד בַּאֲחָדִי לַחֹדֶשׁ  
הַשֵּׁנִי בַשָּׁנָה הַשֵּׁנִית לְצֵאתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר:

(1) **On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, saying:**

**In the wilderness of Sinai:** These events take place at Sinai, the site of the giving of the Torah. But although it is the same place and the same people, the perspective has already changed. In the previous verse – the very last words of the book of Leviticus (27:34) – we read: “These are the commandments that the Lord gave Moses for the Israelite people on Mount Sinai.” But here it is called the wilderness of Sinai.

A person’s situation is determined not only by the place where he is physically located at the given moment, but also by his perspective, which in turn determines the trajectory of his subsequent movement. The perspective of the books of Exodus and Leviticus is Mount Sinai, the place where the Torah was given and received. But now the Jewish nation has turned toward the wilderness, and in this book of Numbers that is the new perspective.

**In the Tent of Meeting:** This mention of the Tent of Meeting ties the beginning of this book of Numbers with the end of the book of Exo-

dus, where we read: “Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it. When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out, on their various journeys” (Exod. 40:35-6).

(As already noted, Numbers, this fourth book of the Torah, is one of two direct continuations of the second book, Exodus. This is notwithstanding the fact that the other of the two continuations, Leviticus – the third book of the Torah – intercedes.)

But there is also a larger thematic connection between Exodus and Numbers. All the commandments and instructions received at Sinai – a primary theme of the book of Exodus – are essential for conquering the Land of Israel. That will be where the fulfillment of those commandments is to be realized, and to which this book’s wanderings through the wilderness ultimately will lead.

**On the first day of the second month:** Iyar, the second month of the Jewish calendar, is by its very nature a month of independence.<sup>4</sup> It was precisely such independence that the Jewish nation was now about to achieve.

**On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt:** We will see later (Num. 9:1) that even before the events of the second month as described here, the second Passover had already been observed in the middle of the first month of that second year (that is, one year after the Exodus).

This is a prime example of the Talmudic principle that the written Torah does not always record events in their actual chronological order.

Thus, we can summarize the chronology of the Exodus and the succeeding twelve months as follows:

On the fifteenth day of the month of Aviv (which later came to be known as Nisan), in the year 2448 from the Creation, the long-awaited Exodus occurs, and the Jews finally leave Egypt. This moment marks the beginning of the biblical Jewish calendar for both months and years.

Six days later, on the seventh day they cross the Sea of Reeds.

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<sup>4</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 15.3.

And five weeks after that, or about six weeks after the Exodus, they reach Mount Sinai, at the beginning of the third month (Sivan) of that first year.

The fiftieth day after the Exodus, the sixth of Sivan, is the day of the Giving of the Torah. Moses immediately ascends the mountain, and remains there forty days and forty nights.

The end of that forty-day period falls on the seventeenth day of the fourth month, Tammuz, still in the first year following the Exodus. On that day, the Jews create the golden calf. Some hours later Moses descends from the mountain and breaks the Tablets of the Covenant. A major crisis ensues, which delays the nation's advance to the Land of Israel. It even casts a shadow of doubt on the Exodus itself, and on the very future existence of the Jewish people (Exod. 32:10).

Moses then spends another forty days and nights petitioning God to forgive the people for their sin. After that he ascends the Mountain once again, this time carrying blank stones he has prepared to become the second tablets (Exod. 33:1). After forty more days Moses descends from the mountain, carrying the second, new set of tablets.

That day, the tenth day of the seventh month (Tishri), is then declared for all generations to come as Yom Kippur, the most sacred day on the Jewish calendar, the day on which each and every year the Almighty and man achieve true reconciliation.

Having overcome the crisis of the golden calf, the people begin construction of the Tabernacle and the manufacture of its sacred vessels. The Tabernacle is finally complete and fully erected on the first day of Nisan of the second year (Exod. 40:17). That date is five months after Moses received the second Tablets, and two weeks short of the first anniversary of the Exodus.

The consecration of the Tabernacle lasts seven days (Lev. 9:1). One week later, on the fifteen day of Nisan, exactly one year after the Exodus, the Jews again celebrate Passover (Num. 9:1).

Two weeks after the anniversary of the Exodus, on the first day of the second month, the census begins (as indicated in the opening passage of this book of Numbers). The nation then resumes its journey toward the Land of Israel – to conquer it, inhabit it, and settle it.

Thus, the recounting of events at the beginning of this book of Numbers does not correspond to the actual historical chronology. Although the census is described before the observance of the second Passover, in fact it occurred after that second Passover, not before it.

Why does the Torah in this case depart from the chronological order of the events?

We can explain this as follows. Because the book of Numbers is primarily a book of wanderings, it begins not with a description of the Passover celebration, but with God's instructions concerning the relative positions that the tribes should occupy during their travels through the wilderness.

## § 2.2. THE RULES GOVERNING THE CENSUS (1:2-19)

ב שֶׁאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עֵדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְבֵית אָבֹתָם  
 בְּמִסְפַּר שְׁמוֹת כָּל־זָכָר לְגִלְגֻלְתָּם: ג מִבְּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְמַעְלָה כָּל־יָצֵא  
 צָבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל תִּפְקְדוּ אֹתָם לְצַבְאָתָם אֹתָהּ וְאֶהְרֹן: ד וְאֹתְכֶם יִהְיוּ אִישׁ  
 אִישׁ לְמִטָּה אִישׁ רֹאשׁ לְבֵית־אָבֹתָיו הוּא: ה וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת הָאָנָשִׁים  
 אֲשֶׁר יַעֲמְדוּ אִתְּכֶם לְרֹאשׁוֹן אֲלִיצֹר בֶּן־שִׁדְיָאוּר: ו לְשֹׁמְרוֹן שְׁלֹמִיאֵל  
 בֶּן־צֹרִישַׁדִּי: ז לְיִהוּדָה נַחֲשׁוֹן בֶּן־עַמִּינָדָב: ח לְיִשְׁשָׁכָר נַתָּנָאֵל בֶּן־  
 צֹעֲרָה: ט לְזַבּוּלֹן אֲלִיאָב בֶּן־חֶלֶץ: י לְבִנְיָמִן יוֹסֵף לְאֶפְרַיִם אֲלִישַׁמֶּעַ  
 בֶּן־עַמִּי הוּד לְמִנְשֵׁה גְמִלְיָאֵל בֶּן־פְּדָה צֹרִי: יא לְלֵוִי לְבִנְיָמִן אֲבִידֹן בֶּן־  
 גְּדַעְנִי: יב לְדָן אַחִיעֶזֶר בֶּן־עַמִּישַׁדִּי: יג לְאַשֶׁר פְּגַעִיאֵל בֶּן־עֶכְרֹן: יד לְגָד  
 אֲלִיסָף בֶּן־דְּעוּאֵל: טו לְנַפְתָּלִי אַחִירַע בֶּן־עֵינָן: טז אֶלֶה קְרִיאִי (קְרוּאִי)  
 הָעֵדָה נְשִׂאֵי מִטּוֹת אָבוֹתָם רֹאשֵׁי אֲלֵפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵם: יז וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה  
 וְאֶהְרֹן אֶת הָאָנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר נִקְבּוּ בְשֵׁמֹת: יח וְאֵת כָּל־הָעֵדָה  
 הִקְהִילוּ בְּאֶחָד לְחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁנִי וַיִּתְּלָדוּ עַל־מִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְבֵית אָבֹתָם  
 בְּמִסְפַּר שְׁמוֹת מִבְּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְמַעְלָה לְגִלְגֻלְתָּם: יט כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי  
 אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפְקְדֵם בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי:

(2) **Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head.**

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- (3) **You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms.**
  - (4) **Associated with you shall be a man from each tribe, each one the head of his ancestral house.**
  - (5) **These are the names of the men who shall assist you: From Reuben, Elizur son of Shedeur.**
  - (6) **From Simeon, Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai.**
  - (7) **From Judah, Nahshon son of Amminadab.**
  - (8) **From Issachar, Nethanel son of Zuar.**
  - (9) **From Zebulun, Eliab son of Helon.**
  - (10) **From the sons of Joseph: from Ephraim, Elishama son of Ammihud; from Manasseh, Gamaliel son of Pedahzur.**
  - (11) **From Benjamin, Abidan son of Gideon.**
  - (12) **From Dan, Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai.**
  - (13) **From Asher, Pagiel son of Ochrán.**
  - (14) **From Gad, Eliasaph son of Deuel.**
  - (15) **From Naphtali, Ahira son of Enan.**
  - (16) **Those are the elected of the assembly, the chieftains of their ancestral tribes: they are the heads of the contingents of Israel.**
  - (17) **So Moses and Aaron took those men, who were designated by name,**
  - (18) **and on the first day of the second month they convoked the whole community, who were registered by the clans of their ancestral houses – the names of those aged twenty years and over being listed head by head.**
  - (19) **As the Lord had commanded Moses, so he recorded them in the wilderness of Sinai.**

**(2) Take a census of the whole Israelite community:** The number of people at the time of the Exodus is reported in the Torah in several places, and from time to time the information is given in more detail. Namely:

(i) At the time of the Exodus the Torah indicates the number of people who left Egypt, but only in approximate terms: “The Israelites journeyed from Raamses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children” (Exod. 12:37). Moreover, the people themselves are not involved in the counting process.

(ii) At Mount Sinai, soon after the giving of the Torah, God prescribes a precise method for counting the people: “When you take a census of the Israelite people ... This is what everyone ... shall pay: a half-shekel” (Exod. 30:12-13). Then, some months later, when the construction of the Tabernacle is completed, the census count obtained by that method is reported precisely, but only as a single grand total: “A half-shekel a head, half a shekel by the sanctuary weight, for each one ... from the age of twenty years up, 603,550 men” (Exod. 38:26).

(iii) Here, at the beginning of the book of Numbers, a systematic, detailed census methodology is described, giving full consideration to names and social structure, and to the participation of the nation’s representatives in organizing and executing the census. The results of that census are reported in detail – the number of able-bodied men (“all who were able to bear arms” – an oft-repeated phrase in this census) for each tribe individually, as well as the grand total.

These changes in the structuring of census information reflect the nation’s gradual transition from their complete lack of initiative at the Exodus, and their social amorphism as slaves, to the eventual construction of a self-organized, self-regulating society in which individuality and social connections are at least as important as the grand total of the census count. In the Land of Israel, the people’s ultimate destination, such social autonomy will be essential to life.

**(3) From the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms:** The adult military force is calculated, the military that will be needed for waging war.

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If not for the incident of the spies, for which the nation was punished to roam the wilderness for forty years (Num. 14:33), they could have conquered and inhabited the Land immediately. Thus, the census conducted here was needed also for ensuring a proportionally equitable division of the territory among the tribes.

**Take a census of the whole Israelite community:** Taking a census means gathering, or “enrolling” the individuals into a single, unified community. The objective is to make each person responsible for the fate of the entire community, but also to provide protection, both physical and spiritual, to each individual Jew by virtue of his or her membership in the Jewish nation.

**A census ... listing the names:** In our personal associations with people, we refer to them by name, but the military requires a numerical, not merely nominal, accounting of its forces. Thus, these are two complementary aspects of life. In the individual aspect, names dominate, but in the collective, numbers. This situation corresponds to two fundamental human aspirations: to be important as an individual, and at the same time to feel that one is a part of a larger whole.

**Take a census ... by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names:** The counting to be done here is not a mere flat count, but a hierarchical count, based on ancestry. A nation is not just an agglomeration of individuals; it has an organic structure, comprised of tribes and families.

A similar multilevel structure exists in all organic (as opposed to mechanical) entities. Consider the human body, for example. The human body is not a flat structure of just cells; rather, cells combine into tissues, and tissues into organs; the body then consists of those organs. It is just such structures that give the organism its resilience.

**Head by head:** The Midrash understands this as meaning that the census was conducted at a personal level. In order to be included in the census, each individual had to appear in person before Moses and Aaron, and before the person’s tribal representatives. Thus, being included in the census was essentially equivalent to taking an oath. This created among the people an understanding of national belonging and responsibility.

**Record them:** *Tifkedu* derives from the verbal root *P K D*. Although one of its most common meanings is to count, the underlying meaning of this word is to be positioned in the proper place, or to function correctly. (In modern Hebrew, *tafkid*, from the same verbal root, is a position (i.e., of responsibility, for which a person is hired or otherwise engaged).

The census was needed not only for collecting numerical data, but to help each person to realize his or her organic place – and function – within the nation. In fact, this same verb gives the book itself the name *Chumash Ha-Pekudim*, which later became “the book of Numbers.” The core essence of this book is to be found precisely in each person’s realization of his place and purpose.

**You and Aaron:** Here the importance of unifying “the Torah of Moses” and “the Torah of Aaron” is emphasized, for without this the Jewish nation could not proceed on its journey.<sup>5</sup>

The Exodus from Egypt began similarly with an appeal to Moses and Aaron together: “The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you” (Exod. 12:1-2). This union of Moses and Aaron, which fractured in the process of the Giving of the Torah,<sup>6</sup> is now being restored.

**(4) Associated with you shall be a man from each tribe:** Not only the national authorities – Moses and Aaron – execute the census; each tribe’s representative also participates in its implementation. This reflects the increase in the level of communal self-organization that we have mentioned earlier.

**(5-17) These are the names of the men who shall assist you ... So, Moses and Aaron took those men, who were designated by name:** The fact that this Divine instruction includes designating each tribe’s leader by name demonstrates that the approach to leadership

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<sup>5</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 21.

<sup>6</sup> During the giving of the Torah, Moses ascended the mountain, while Aaron remained below. It was this separation that led to the creation of the golden calf. The reason for the separation was that the giving of the Torah could happen only through Moses; Aaron was not capable of it. See § 9.7 below.

and administration was not homogeneous across the tribes, but varied from tribe to tribe. The Exodus has changed the entire structure of social life, and here, most likely, each tribe was undergoing its own process of forming new leadership.

**For Reuben:** The tribes and their respective representatives for performing the census are not enumerated in order of seniority, but follow the hierarchy of Jacob's children: first Leah's sons, then Rachel's sons, and then the maidservants' sons.

**Elizur son of Shedeur:** Most of these names include theophanic elements (e.g., el, *tsur*, *shaddai*), indicating the strong sense of the Jewish people's connection with the Almighty.

**(18) The names of those aged twenty years and over being listed:** Literally, "by the numbers of names twenty years and over." This somewhat unusual formulation means that the census was conducted such that it considered both the collective aspect, the numbers, and the individual aspect, the names.

### § 2.3. THE CENSUS RESULTS (1:20-44)

כ ויהיו בני־ראובן בכר ישראל תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם  
 במספר שמות לגלגלתם כל־זכר מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא  
 צבא: כא פקדיהם למטה ראובן ששה וארבעים אלף וחמש מאות:  
 כב לבני שמעון תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם פקדיו במספר  
 שמות לגלגלתם כל־זכר מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא  
 צבא: כג פקדיהם למטה שמעון תשעה וחמשים אלף ושלוש מאות:  
 כד לבני גד תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר שמות מבן  
 עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא צבא: כה פקדיהם למטה גד חמשה  
 וארבעים אלף ושש מאות וחמשים:  
 כו לבני יהודה תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר שמת מבן  
 עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא צבא: כז פקדיהם למטה יהודה ארבעה  
 ושבעים אלף ושש מאות:

כח לבני יששכר תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר שמת  
מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא צבא: כט פקדיהם למטה יששכר  
ארבעה וחמשים אלה וארבע מאות:

ל לבני זבולן תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר שמת מבן  
עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא צבא: לא פקדיהם למטה זבולן שבעה  
וחמשים אלה וארבע מאות:

לב לבני יוסף אפרים תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר  
שמת מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא צבא: לב פקדיהם למטה  
אפרים ארבעים אלה וחמש מאות:

לד לבני מנשה תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר שמת מבן  
עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא צבא: לה פקדיהם למטה מנשה שנים  
ושלשים אלה ומאתים:

לו לבני בנימין תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר שמת מבן  
עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא צבא: לו פקדיהם למטה בנימין חמשה  
ושלשים אלה וארבע מאות:

לה לבני דן תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר שמת מבן  
עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא צבא: לט פקדיהם למטה דן שנים  
וששים אלה ושבע מאות:

מ לבני אשר תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר שמת מבן  
עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא צבא: מא פקדיהם למטה אשר אחד  
וארבעים אלה וחמש מאות:

מב בני נפתלי תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר שמת מבן  
עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא צבא: מג פקדיהם למטה נפתלי שלשה  
וחמשים אלה וארבע מאות:

מד אלה הפקדים אשר פקד משה ואהרן וגשיאי ישראל שנים  
עשר איש איש אחד לבית-אבתיו היו: מה ויהיו כל-פקודי בני-  
ישראל לבית אבתם מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כל-יצא צבא  
בישראל: מו ויהיו כל-הפקדים שש-מאות אלה ושלשת אלפים  
וחמש מאות וחמשים: מז והלויים למטה אבתם לא התפקדו בתוכם:

(20) They totaled as follows: The descendants of Reuben, Israel's first-born, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, head by head, all males aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms –

(21) those enrolled from the tribe of Reuben: 46,500.

(22) Of the descendants of Simeon, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, their enrollment as listed by name, head by head, all males aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms –

(23) those enrolled from the tribe of Simeon: 59,300.

(24) Of the descendants of Gad, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms –

(25) those enrolled from the tribe of Gad: 45,650.

(26) Of the descendants of Judah, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms –

(27) those enrolled from the tribe of Judah: 74,600.

(28) Of the descendants of Issachar, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms –

(29) those enrolled from the tribe of Issachar: 54,400.

(30) Of the descendants of Zebulun, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms –

(31) those enrolled from the tribe of Zebulun: 57,400.

(32) Of the descendants of Joseph: Of the descendants of Ephraim, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms –

(33) those enrolled from the tribe of Ephraim: 40,500.

(34) Of the descendants of Manasseh, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms –

(35) those enrolled from the tribe of Manasseh: 32,200.

(36) **Of the descendants of Benjamin, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms –**

(37) **those enrolled from the tribe of Benjamin: 35,400.**

(38) **Of the descendants of Dan, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms –**

(39) **those enrolled from the tribe of Dan: 62,700.**

(40) **Of the descendants of Asher, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms –**

(41) **those enrolled from the tribe of Asher: 41,500.**

(42) **[Of] the descendants of Naphtali, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms –**

(43) **those enrolled from the tribe of Naphtali: 53,400.**

(44) **Those are the enrollments recorded by Moses and Aaron and by the chieftains of Israel, who were twelve in number, one man to each ancestral house.**

**(20) The descendants of Reuben, Israel's first-born:** Of all the twelve tribes, Reuben's census results are reported first. Here the tribe of Reuben still retains its primacy, but later, as the journey through the wilderness begins, the leadership will pass to the tribe of Judah.

**(21) Those enrolled from the tribe of Reuben: 46,500:** Because the purpose of the census is to create an army, all the numbers are rounded to the size of one platoon – fifty men.

**Reuben ... Simeon ... Gad ... Judah ... Issachar ... Zebulun:** Here Gad appears before Judah. The ordering has changed; it no longer corresponds to the birth-order of Jacob's children, but to the arrangement of the four camps in which the people were organized as they journeyed through the wilderness. Gad joins the camp of Reuben and Simon, and Judah forms another camp with Issachar and Zebulun (see illustration below).

This means that in the process of delineating the nation's structure through a census of the entire Israelite community "by the clans of its

ancestral houses, listing the names” (Num. 1:2), a reorganization of the social order took place, and the structure of the relationships among the tribes was altered. Thus, in preparation for traversing the wilderness, the internal transformation of the Jewish people now begins.

#### § 2.4. SIX HUNDRED THOUSAND PERSONS (1:45-47)

מד אלה הפקדים אשר פקד משה ואהרן ונשיאי ישראל שנים  
 עשר איש איש-אחד לבית-אבתיו היו: מה ויהיו כל-פקודי בני-  
 ישראל לבית אבתם מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כל-יזא צבא  
 בישראל: מו ויהיו כל-הפקדים שש-מאות אלה ושלושת אלפים  
 וחמש מאות וחמשים: מז והלויים למטה אבתם לא התפקדו בתוכם:

(45) **All the Israelites, aged twenty years and over, enrolled by ancestral houses, all those in Israel who were able to bear arms –**

(46) **all who were enrolled came to 603,550.**

(47) **The Levites, however, were not recorded among them by their ancestral tribe.**

(46) **All who were enrolled came to 603,550:** That is, somewhat more than six hundred thousand men of military age. (The total number of people was obviously four to five times greater, or about three million people, but no such figure is mentioned anywhere in the Torah.)

We can consider six hundred thousand persons the “minimum national unit” of the Jewish people, the tipping point at which the quantitative increase in population, reaching a certain threshold, gives rise to a qualitative change in the structure of a society: from a family, clan, and tribe to a people and nation. (In Jewish tradition there is even a special blessing that one recites upon seeing that many Jews in one place at the same time.) Only when the Israelite population had reached that minimum number could the Exodus happen, and that number remains operative for all the forty years of wanderings through the wilderness.

The Gaon of Vilna once instructed his disciples,<sup>7</sup> that when the time comes for the *ge'ulah*, the Messianic redemption, they should do their best to assure that there would be six hundred thousand Jews in the Land of Israel at that time. For if that should fail to happen, there would be very great misfortune.

At the time of the Holocaust there were more than four hundred thousand Jews in the Land of Israel. By 1948 that figure had grown to six hundred thousand, and the State of Israel was born. When in 1967 the population of Israel reached six hundred thousand men of military age, the Six Day War broke out, which gave the Jews access to the old city of Jerusalem and the Western Wall – the religious focal point of the country.

#### § 2.5. THE TRIBE OF LEVI IS NOT INCLUDED IN THE GENERAL CENSUS (1:48-54)

מח ויִדְבֹר יי אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: מִט אָדָּךְ אֶת-מִטָּה לִּי לֹא תִפְקֹד וְאֶת-  
 ראשם לֹא תִשָּׂא בְתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וְנִאֲתָה הַפְּקֹד אֶת-הַלְוִיִּם  
 עַל-מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת וְעַל כָּל-כְּלָיוֹ וְעַל כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ הִמָּה יִשְׂאוּ אֶת-  
 הַמִּשְׁכָּן וְאֶת-כָּל-כְּלָיוֹ וְהֵם יִשְׁרְתוּהוּ וְסָבִיב לַמִּשְׁכָּן יִחְנוּ: נֹא וּבְנִסְע  
 הַמִּשְׁכָּן יוֹרִידוּ אֹתוֹ הַלְוִיִּם וּבְחִנֹּת הַמִּשְׁכָּן יִקִּימוּ אֹתוֹ הַלְוִיִּם וְהִזְר  
 הַקָּרֵב יוֹמֵת: נב וְחָנוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ עַל-מַחֲנֵהוּ וְאִישׁ עַל-דֹּגְלוֹ  
 לְצַבָּאתָם: נג וְהַלְוִיִּם יִחְנוּ סָבִיב לַמִּשְׁכָּן הָעֵדוּת וְלֹא-יִהְיֶה קֹצֶף עַל-  
 עֵדוּת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְשִׁמְרוּ הַלְוִיִּם אֶת-מִשְׁמֶרֶת מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת: נד וַיַּעֲשׂוּ  
 בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי אֶת-מֹשֶׁה כִּן עָשׂוּ:

(48) For the Lord had spoken to Moses, saying:

(49) Do not on any account enroll the tribe of Levi or take a census of them with the Israelites.

<sup>7</sup> The Gaon's disciples later published these statements in their celebrated book *Kol Ha-Tor*, where they describe his vision of the process of the Jewish people's future return to the Land of Israel.

(50) **You shall put the Levites in charge of the Tabernacle of the Pact, all its furnishings, and everything that pertains to it: they shall carry the Tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall tend it; and they shall camp around the Tabernacle.**

(51) **When the Tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the Tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up; any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death.**

(52) **The Israelites shall encamp troop by troop, each man with his division and each under his standard.**

(53) **The Levites, however, shall camp around the Tabernacle of the Pact, that wrath may not strike the Israelite community; the Levites shall stand guard around the Tabernacle of the Pact.**

(54) **The Israelites did accordingly; just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so they did.**

**(49-50) Do not ... enroll ... or take a census ... You shall put the Levites in charge:** In this passage the verb *P-K-D* appears in various forms, but all in the sense of something positioned in its proper place, or functioning correctly. As noted previously, the same verb has given this book, Numbers, its name (*Chumash Ha-Pekudim*).

**Do not on any account enroll the tribe of Levi or take a census of them:** The Levites, in a certain sense, are “not quite the people of Israel.” Later, when the nation enters the Land, the Levites will own no portion in it: “You shall, however, have no territorial share among them or own any portion in their midst; I am your portion and your share among the Israelites” (Num. 18:20; see also Deut. 12:12, 14:27).

When the nation goes to war, the Levites impart holiness to the system by providing a connection between the people and the Temple, but they themselves do not fight, and are therefore not included in the census. The Levites must remain apart from the people in order to serve as “a steppingstone to increased potential,” as it were, thereby promoting and increasing sanctity among all the other tribes.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For details see the discussion of Korah’s rebellion in § 12 below.

**You shall put the Levites in charge of the Tabernacle of the Pact:** Here, it is the Levites (not the *kohanim*) who as a group are responsible for the Temple. The book of Numbers is strongly associated with the Levites specifically.

**The Tabernacle of the Pact:** Or, more literally, “the Tabernacle of the Testimony.”

The Tabernacle is known by several names:

(i) *Mishkan*, literally, “place of habitation (or rest),” from the Hebrew root *Sh-K-N*, whence also *Shekhinah*, “the Divine Presence.”

(ii) *Mishkan ha-edut*, literally, “dwelling of the testimony”, or (as here) “the Tabernacle of the Testimony,” because the two tablets, on which the Ten Commandments are inscribed as testimony to the giving of the Torah, are stored in the Tabernacle.

(iii) *Ohel mo’ed*, literally, “the Tent of Meeting (or Assembly),” “the Tabernacle of Revelation (or Predestination, Manifestation)”.

The words *edut*, and *mo’ed*, are cognates. They mean, respectively, “testimony” and “prearranged meeting.” That is, a predetermined place for a meeting with the Almighty.

Another common meaning of *mo’ed* is “festival.” That is, one of the appointed times of the year for a meeting with the Almighty.

**(53) The Levites shall stand guard around the Tabernacle of the Pact:** The Levites are charged with two related functions with respect to the Temple: transporting it, and guarding it.

§ 2.6. THE ORDERING OF THE CAMPS  
IN THE WILDERNESS (2:1-34)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: ב אִישׁ עַל-דִּגְלוֹ בְּאֶתֶת לְבֵית  
אֲבֹתָם יַחְנוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִנֶּגֶד סָבִיב לְאַהֲל־מוֹעֵד יַחְנוּ: ג וְהַחֲנִים  
קִדְמָה מִזְרָחָה דָּגְלָה מַחֲנֵה יְהוּדָה לְצַבְאֹתָם וְנָשִׂיא לְבְנֵי יְהוּדָה  
נַחֲשׁוֹן דּוֹעַמִּינָדָב: ד וּצְבָאוֹ וּפְקֻדֵיהֶם אַרְבַּעָה וּשְׁבַעִים אֵלֶיךָ וְשֵׁשׁ  
מֵאוֹת: ה וְהַחֲנִים עֲלָיו מִטָּה יִשְׁשַׁכֵּר וְנָשִׂיא לְבְנֵי יִשְׁשַׁכָּר נַתָּנָאֵל בֶּן-  
צוּעָר: ו וּצְבָאוֹ וּפְקֻדָיו אַרְבַּעָה וְחַמְשִׁים אֵלֶיךָ וְאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת: ז מִטָּה  
זְבוּלֹן וְנָשִׂיא לְבְנֵי זְבוּלֹן אֱלִיאָב בֶּן-חֶלֶן: ח וּצְבָאוֹ וּפְקֻדָיו שְׁבַעָה  
וְחַמְשִׁים אֵלֶיךָ וְאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת: ט כָּל-הַפְּקֻדָּיִם לְמַחֲנֵה יְהוּדָה מֵאֵת אֵלֶיךָ  
וּשְׁמָנִים אֵלֶיךָ וּשְׁשֶׁת-אַלְפִים וְאַרְבַּע-מֵאוֹת לְצַבְאֹתָם רֵאשֻׁנָה יִסְעוּ:

י דָּגְלָה מַחֲנֵה רְאוּבֵן תִּימְנָה לְצַבְאֹתָם וְנָשִׂיא לְבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן אֱלִיצוּר בֶּן-  
שִׁדְיָאוּר: יא וּצְבָאוֹ וּפְקֻדָיו שְׁשָׁה וְאַרְבַּעִים אֵלֶיךָ וְחַמֶּשׁ מֵאוֹת: יב וְהַחֲנִים  
עֲלָיו מִטָּה שְׁמֵעוֹן וְנָשִׂיא לְבְנֵי שְׁמֵעוֹן שְׁלֵמִיאֵל בֶּן-צוּרִישַׁדִּי: יג וּצְבָאוֹ  
וּפְקֻדֵיהֶם תִּשְׁעָה וְחַמְשִׁים אֵלֶיךָ וּשְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת: יד וּמִטָּה גֵד וְנָשִׂיא  
לְבְנֵי גֵד אֱלִיסָפָה בֶּן-רְעוּאֵל: טו וּצְבָאוֹ וּפְקֻדֵיהֶם חַמֶּשֶׁה וְאַרְבַּעִים אֵלֶיךָ  
וְשֵׁשׁ מֵאוֹת וְחַמְשִׁים: טז כָּל-הַפְּקֻדָּיִם לְמַחֲנֵה רְאוּבֵן מֵאֵת אֵלֶיךָ וְאַחַד  
וְחַמְשִׁים אֵלֶיךָ וְאַרְבַּע-מֵאוֹת וְחַמְשִׁים לְצַבְאֹתָם וּשְׁנַיִם יִסְעוּ:

יז וְנִסְעוּ אֶהֱל־מוֹעֵד מַחֲנֵה הַלְוִיִּם בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּחֲנֵה כַּאֲשֶׁר יַחְנוּ בְּן יִסְעוּ  
אִישׁ עַל-יְדוֹ לְדִגְלֵיהֶם:

יח דָּגְלָה מַחֲנֵה אֶפְרַיִם לְצַבְאֹתָם יִמָּה וְנָשִׂיא לְבְנֵי אֶפְרַיִם אֱלִישַׁמֶּע  
בֶּן-עַמִּיהוּד: יט וּצְבָאוֹ וּפְקֻדֵיהֶם אַרְבַּעִים אֵלֶיךָ וְחַמֶּשׁ מֵאוֹת: כ וְעֲלָיו  
מִטָּה מְנַשֶּׁה וְנָשִׂיא לְבְנֵי מְנַשֶּׁה גְּמִלְיָאֵל בֶּן-פְּדָהצוּר: כא וּצְבָאוֹ  
וּפְקֻדֵיהֶם שְׁנַיִם וּשְׁלֹשִׁים אֵלֶיךָ וּמֵאוֹת: כב וּמִטָּה בְּנִימֵן וְנָשִׂיא לְבְנֵי  
בְּנִימֵן אֲבִידֹן בֶּן-גְּדֵעֲנִי: כג וּצְבָאוֹ וּפְקֻדֵיהֶם חַמֶּשֶׁה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים אֵלֶיךָ  
וְאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת: כד כָּל-הַפְּקֻדָּיִם לְמַחֲנֵה אֶפְרַיִם מֵאֵת אֵלֶיךָ וּשְׁמָנַת-  
אַלְפִים וּמֵאָה לְצַבְאֹתָם וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יִסְעוּ:

כה דגל מחנה דן צפנה לצבאתם ונשיא לבני דן אחיעזר  
 בן-עמישדי: כו וצבאו ופקדיהם שנים וששים אלף ושבע  
 מאות: כז והחנים עליו מטה אשר ונשיא לבני אשר פגעאל בן-  
 עכרן: כח וצבאו ופקדיהם אחד וארבעים אלף וחמש מאות: כט ומטה  
 נפתלי ונשיא לבני נפתלי אחירע בן-עינן: ל וצבאו ופקדיהם שלשה  
 וחמשים אלף וארבע מאות: לא כל-הפקדים למחנה דן מאת אלף  
 ושבעה וחמשים אלף ושש מאות לאתרה יסעו לדגליהם:  
 לב אלה פקודי בני-ישראל לבית אבתם כל-פקודי המחנות לצבאתם  
 שש-מאות אלף ושלושת אלפים וחמש מאות וחמשים: לג והלוים  
 לא התפקדו בתוך בני ישראל באשר צוה יי את-משה: לד ויעשו בני  
 ישראל לכל אשר-צוה יי את-משה בן-חגו לדגליהם וכן נסעו איש  
 למשפחתיו על-בית אבתיו:

(1) The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:

(2) The Israelites shall camp each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house; they shall camp around the Tent of Meeting at a distance.

(3) Camped on the front, or east side: the standard of the division of Judah, troop by troop. Chieftain of the Judites: Nahshon son of Amminadab.

(4) His troop, as enrolled: 74,600.

(5) Camping next to it: The tribe of Issachar. Chieftain of the Issacharites: Nethanel son of Zuar.

(6) His troop, as enrolled: 54,400.

(7) The tribe of Zebulun. Chieftain of the Zebulunites: Eliab son of Helon.

(8) His troop, as enrolled: 57,400.

(9) The total enrolled in the division of Judah: 186,400, for all troops. These shall march first.

(10) On the south: the standard of the division of Reuben, troop by troop. Chieftain of the Reubenites: Elizur son of Shedeur.

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- (11) His troop, as enrolled: 46,500.
- (12) Camping next to it: The tribe of Simeon. Chieftain of the Simeonites: Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai.
- (13) His troop, as enrolled: 59,300.
- (14) And the tribe of Gad. Chieftain of the Gadites: Eliasaph son of Reuel.
- (15) His troop, as enrolled: 45,650.
- (16) The total enrolled in the division of Reuben: 151,450, for all troops. These shall march second.
- (17) Then, midway between the divisions, the Tent of Meeting, the division of the Levites, shall move. As they camp, so they shall march, each in position, by their standards.
- (18) On the west: the standard of the division of Ephraim, troop by troop. Chieftain of the Ephraimites: Elishama son of Ammihud.
- (19) His troop, as enrolled: 40,500.
- (20) Next to it: The tribe of Manasseh. Chieftain of the Manassites: Gamaliel son of Pedahzur.
- (21) His troop, as enrolled: 32,200.
- (22) And the tribe of Benjamin. Chieftain of the Benjaminites: Abidan son of Gideon.
- (23) His troop, as enrolled: 35,400.
- (24) The total enrolled in the division of Ephraim: 108,100 for all troops. These shall march third.
- (25) On the north: the standard of the division of Dan, troop by troop. Chieftain of the Danites: Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai.
- (26) His troop, as enrolled: 62,700.
- (27) Camping next to it: The tribe of Asher. Chieftain of the Asherites: Pagiel son of Ochran.
- (28) His troop, as enrolled: 41,500.
- (29) And the tribe of Naphtali. Chieftain of the Naphtalites: Ahira son of Enan.

(30) **His troop, as enrolled: 53,400.**

(31) **The total enrolled in the division of Dan: 157,600. These shall march last, by their standards.**

(32) **Those are the enrollments of the Israelites by ancestral houses. The total enrolled in the divisions, for all troops: 603,550.**

(33) **The Levites, however, were not recorded among the Israelites, as the Lord had commanded Moses.**

(34) **The Israelites did accordingly; just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so they camped by their standards, and so they marched, each with his clan according to his ancestral house.**

**(2) The Israelites shall camp:** Knowing the order of the camps and the sequence of their movements helps to understand the structure of the nation.

**Each with his standard:** The banner is visible from afar. It is a very noticeable, eye-catching representation of the tribe's unique identity. According to the Midrash, the color of each tribe's banner matched the color of the tribe's stone on the High Priest's breastpiece (Exod. 28:21). The color and banner of each tribe proclaims the tribe's special character, its "color" in the sense of a defining principle. Only through the integration and unification of all these ideas is it possible to build a fully developed Jewish nation.

**They shall camp around the Tent of Meeting at a distance:** Here the Torah establishes the concept of holiness as central to the life of the Jewish people. And yet, this concept is further complemented by the idea that the people must keep some distance from the Tabernacle, from the center of holiness, thus emphasizing that holiness has a transcendental character.

**(3-9) Camped on the front, or east side: the standard of the division of Judah ... These shall march first:** The restructuring of the national leadership continues. In verse 1:20, Reuben, the eldest son of Jacob, was mentioned first. But here the leadership now belongs to the

tribe of Judah, and it is the tribe of Judah who will later become the tribe of royalty.

**On the front, or east side:** Judah's encampment position is on the east, facing the entrance to the Tabernacle of Revelation and adjacent to Moses' and Aaron's position. This strengthens the connection between the nation's religious and military leadership.

**(3-7) The standard of the division of Judah... Camping next to it: The tribe of Issachar ... The tribe of Zebulun:** Issachar and Zebulun, Leah's younger sons, accept Judah's leadership, unlike Reuben and Simon, her two oldest sons, who object to it.

The Midrash also reports that there was a special cooperation and partnership between the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun, and that subsequently they occupied adjacent territories in the Land of Israel.

**(10-14) On the south: the standard of the division of Reuben... Camping next to it: The tribe of Simeon ... (14) And the tribe of Gad:** Because Reuben and Simon, Leah's oldest sons, refuse to acknowledge the leadership of Judah, their younger brother, they are in a different camp. Gad, the eldest son of Zilpah, Leah's maidservant, joins them. Thus, this is the camp of those who are offended by the position that Judah is now assuming, which will come to a head in the insurrection of Korah and with the neighboring family, the descendants of Kohat (see below Num. 3:5).

Reuben and Gad, who become close allies during the journey through the wilderness, will later settle together in the Transjordan (Num. 32:1), while Simon, a problematic tribe,<sup>9</sup> loses his right to a receive his own inheritance in the Land and is subsumed by the territory of Judah.

**(18-22) On the west: the standard of the division of Ephraim ... Next to it: The tribe of Manasseh ... And the tribe of Benjamin:** These are the children of Rachel, the second center of the Jewish people, in the sense that they serve as a counterweight to the kingdom of Judah. From them will descend the "other" Messiah, *Mashiach ben Yosef*, a complement and contrast to the primary Messiah, who is a scion of Judah.

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<sup>9</sup> This is evident, for example, in the incident of Zimri (Num. 25:14).

**(25-29) On the north: the standard of the division of Dan ... The tribe of Asher ... And the tribe of Naphtali:** These are the descendants of the Jacob's two handmaidens, Bilhah and Zilpah. Because Gad (the first-born of Zilpah, Leah's handmaiden) was assigned to Reuben's camp, Dan (the first-born of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaiden) is given a leading role here, and the younger sons of the handmaidens consent to his leadership.

Dan is an anarchistic tribe, who opposes the system on principle. Its most prominent representative is Samson, a "hooligan judge."<sup>10</sup> In the journey through the Wilderness, the Dan camp is called (Num. 10:25) the "rear guard" (which the Midrash also understands as "the camp that lags behind").

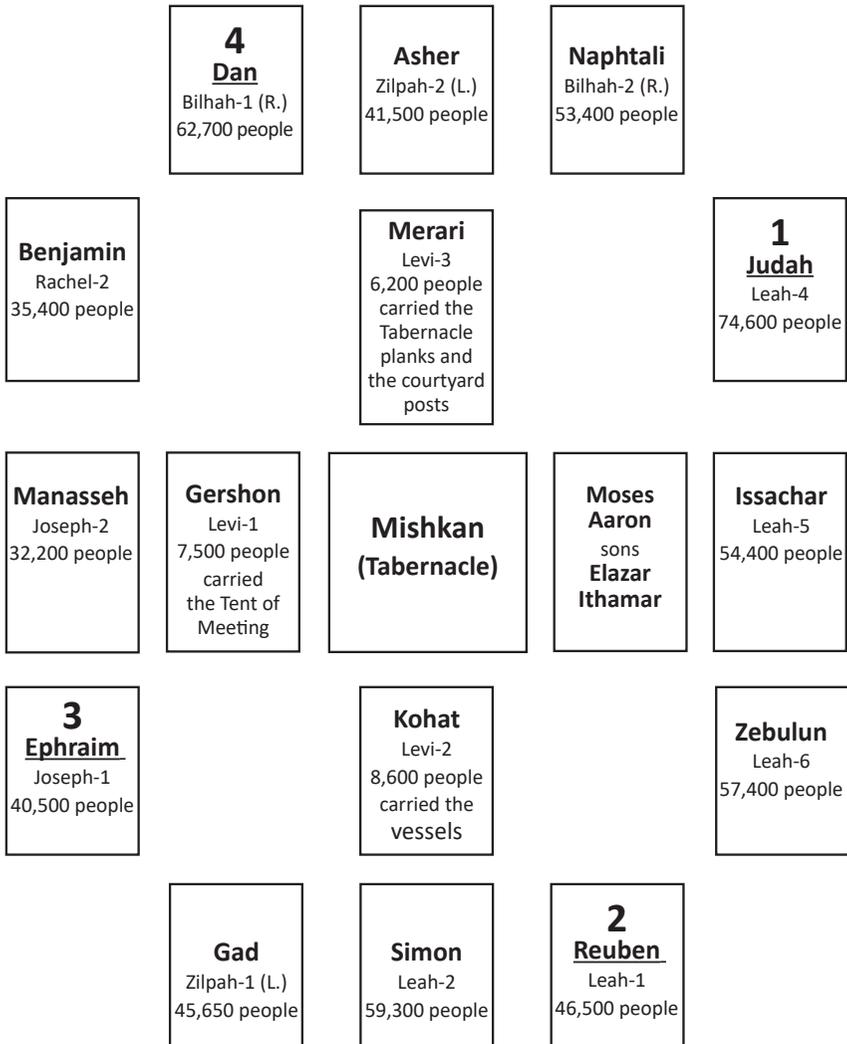
Thus, although several centuries have already passed since the era of Jacob and his twelve sons, the physical positioning and subordination hierarchy of the tribes generally preserves the structure of Jacob's family, albeit with some changes, such as the leadership of Judah. But this too had been established early on, even during the lifetimes of Jacob's sons, the founders of the twelve tribes (see Gen. 49:10).

**(17) Then, midway between the divisions ... the division of the Levites:** Although the tribes retain the hierarchy of Jacob's twelve sons, this does not apply to the Levites, who depart from the structure of the tribes and assume a central role in the Temple. Thus, all the rest of the tribes align themselves around the Levites.

**(17) Then, midway between the divisions, the Tent of Meeting, the division of the Levites, shall move:** During normal movement through the wilderness, the Levites march at the center of the camps of the twelve tribes, but at the onset of the wilderness travels the order was different. See § 9.2 below.

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<sup>10</sup> See Jud. 13:2, and also the story of Micah's idol in Jud. 18. Later, this tribe will not be able to take possession of the territory of the country allotted to them (the area along the Mediterranean coast that is now Tel Aviv and Gush Dan), and they will relocate instead to the north (the vicinity of today's Tel Dan Nature Reserve), near the territories of Asher and Naphtali.



*The ordering of the camps of the 12 tribes of Israel in the wilderness.*

## § 3. ENUMERATING THE LEVITES

### § 3.1. THE LEVITE ADMINISTRATION AS HEADED BY AARON'S SONS (3:1-10)

א וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת אַהֲרֹן וּמֹשֶׁה בַּיּוֹם דִּבֶּר יְיָ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי: ב וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי־אַהֲרֹן הַבֶּכֶר | נָדָב וְאַבִּיהוּא אֲלֶעָזָר וְאִיתָמָר: ג אֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֲנִים הַמְּשֻׁחִים אֲשֶׁר־מִלֵּא יָדָם לְכַהֵן: ד וַיָּמָת נָדָב וְאַבִּיהוּא לִפְנֵי יְיָ בְּהַקְרִיב אֵשׁ זָרָה לִפְנֵי יְיָ בַּמִּדְבָּר סִינַי וּבָנִים לֹא־הָיוּ לָהֶם וַיְכַהֵן אֲלֶעָזָר וְאִיתָמָר עַל־פְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן אֲבִיהֶם:

ה וַיִּדְבֶּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ו הַקְרִיב אֶת־מִטָּה לְזֵי וְהַעֲמַדְתָּ אֹתָהּ לִפְנֵי אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וְשָׂרְתָהּ אֹתָהּ: ז וְשָׂמְרוּ אֶת־מִשְׁמֶרְתָּהּ וְאֶת־מִשְׁמֶרֶת כָּל־הָעֵדָה לִפְנֵי אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לְעִבְדָּה אֶת־עֲבֹדַת הַמִּשְׁכָּן: ח וְשָׂמְרוּ אֶת־כָּל־כְּלֵי אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֶת־מִשְׁמֶרֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעִבְדָּה אֶת־עֲבֹדַת הַמִּשְׁכָּן: ט וְנִתְּתָה אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו נְתוּנִים נְתוּנִים הֵמָּה לְזֵ מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: י וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת־בָּנָיו תִּפְקֹד וְשָׂמְרוּ אֶת־כְּהֻנַּתָּם וְהָיָה הַקְרִיב יוֹמָת:

- (1) This is the line of Aaron and Moses at the time that the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai.
- (2) These were the names of Aaron's sons: Nadab, the first-born, and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar;
- (3) those were the names of Aaron's sons, the anointed priests who were ordained for priesthood.
- (4) But Nadab and Abihu died by the will of the Lord, when they offered alien fire before the Lord in the wilderness of Sinai; and they left no sons. So it was Eleazar and Ithamar who served as priests in the lifetime of their father Aaron.

- (5) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**
- (6) **Advance the tribe of Levi and place them in attendance upon Aaron the priest to serve him.**
- (7) **They shall perform duties for him and for the whole community before the Tent of Meeting, doing the work of the Tabernacle.**
- (8) **They shall take charge of all the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting – a duty on behalf of the Israelites – doing the work of the Tabernacle.**
- (9) **You shall assign the Levites to Aaron and to his sons: they are formally assigned to him from among the Israelites.**
- (10) **You shall make Aaron and his sons responsible for observing their priestly duties; and any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death.**

**(1) This is the line of Aaron and Moses at the time that the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai:** After that introduction (“the line of Aaron and Moses”) only the line of Aaron is mentioned. There is no mention of Moses’ line. The Midrash explains that Moses appears in this context because he became a spiritual father to Aaron’s sons.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Aaron’s sons are mentioned in the Torah many times, but Moses’ two sons only three times: at the birth of the older son (Exod. 2:22), upon leaving Midian (Exod. 4:20), and when Jethro arrives at Sinai, accompanied by Moses’ wife and children (Exod. 18:3). Beyond that, nothing at all is reported about Moses’ two sons.

Moreover, as personalities Moses’ sons never act anywhere in the Torah; they are always objects, never subjects. But Aaron’s sons, on the contrary, are always subjects and highly active (sometimes even too active, see Lev. 10:1). By taking charge of a priesthood after Aaron, they perform the important national function.

The Midrash even believes that Moses’ sons were rather unworthy individuals, and that the Levite in the incident of Micah’s idol (Jud. 17:7) was a descendant of Moses. We can take this in some sense as a criticism of Moses, for being so occupied with needs of the nation that he paid little attention to raising his own children.

Moses alienation from family life went still further, for he even separated from his wife (which happened at the very beginning of the journey through the wilderness, not long after the Revelation at Sinai). It is therefore obvious that Moses was not in a position to properly influence his children.

As he also says about himself below (see § 9.4), Moses’ immortal contribution to the Jewish people was as *Moshe rabbeinu*, “Moses our teacher” (not progenitor). He was eminently successful as a teacher, but a failure as a parent.

**(4) So it was Eleazar and Ithamar who served as priests in the lifetime of their father Aaron:** This verse introduces us to the fact that the Levites will eventually concede the leadership position to the, *kohanim*, the descendants of Aaron.

**(6) Advance the tribe of Levi and place them in attendance upon Aaron the priest to serve him:** Earlier, the Torah gave a detailed account of the organization of all the other tribes. Here we learn the nature of the hierarchical order within the tribe of Levi.

**(9) You shall assign the Levites to Aaron and to his sons:** they are formally assigned to him from among the Israelites: Thus, the Levites were removed, as it were, from the nation as a whole, and transferred instead to the descendants of Aaron That is, in terms of governance, Levites were formally assigned to serve under Aaron's descendants direct supervision.

### § 3.2. THE LEVITES REPLACE THE FIRSTBORNS (3:11-16)

יא וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: יב וַאֲנִי הִנֵּה לִקְחָתִי אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תַּחַת כָּל־בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר רַחֵם מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיוּ לִי הַלְוִיִּם: יג כִּי לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּיוֹם הַכֹּתִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם הַקְדַּשְׁתִּי לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֲדָם עַד־בְּהֵמָה לִי יִהְיוּ אֲנִי יי:

יד וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בַּמִּדְבָּר סִינַי לֵאמֹר: טו פֶּקֶד אֶת־בְּנֵי לְוִי לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם לְמִשְׁפַּחָתָם כָּל־זָכָר מִבְּנוֹ־חֵדֶשׁ וּמַעֲלָה תִּפְקְדוּם: טז וַיִּפְקֹד אַתָּם מֹשֶׁה עַל־פִּי יי כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה: יז וַיְהִי־וְאֵלֶּה בְּנֵי־לוֹי בְּשֵׁמֹתָם גְּרִשׁוֹן וַקֵּהַת וּמְרָרִי: יח וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי־גְרִשׁוֹן לְמִשְׁפַּחָתָם לְבָנָי וְשִׁמְעִי: יט וּבְנֵי קֵהַת לְמִשְׁפַּחָתָם עִמְרָם וַיִּצְהָר חֲבֵרוֹן וְעִזֹּאֵל: כ וּבְנֵי מְרָרִי לְמִשְׁפַּחָתָם מַחֲלִי וּמוּשִׁי אֵלֶּה הֵם מִשְׁפַּחַת הַלְוִי לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם: כא לְגְרִשׁוֹן מִשְׁפַּחַת הַלְבָנִי וּמִשְׁפַּחַת הַשִּׁמְעִי אֵלֶּה הֵם מִשְׁפַּחַת הַגְּרִשָּׁנִי: כב פִּקְדֵיהֶם בְּמִסְפַּר כָּל־זָכָר מִבְּנוֹ־חֵדֶשׁ וּמַעֲלָה פִּקְדֵיהֶם שִׁבְעַת אֲלָפִים וַחֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת: כג מִשְׁפַּחַת הַגְּרִשָּׁנִי אַחֲרֵי הַמִּשְׁכָּן יַחְנוּ יָמָה: כד וּנְשֵׂיא בֵית־אָב לְגְרִשָּׁנִי אֲלִיסָף בֶּן־לֵאל: כה וּמִשְׁמֶרֶת בְּנֵי־גְרִשׁוֹן בְּאֵהֶל מוֹעֵד הַמִּשְׁכָּן וְהָאֵהֶל מִכֹּסְהוּ

וּמִסֵּד פָּתַח אֶהְלֵ מוֹעֵד: כּוּ וְקִלְעֵי הַחֲצֵר וְאֶת־מִסְדֵּי פֶתַח הַחֲצֵר אֲשֶׁר  
עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן וְעַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ סָבִיב וְאֵת מִיתְרָיו לְכֹל עֲבָדָתוֹ:

(11) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**

(12) **I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites in place of all the first-born, the first issue of the womb among the Israelites: the Levites shall be Mine.**

(13) **For every first-born is Mine: at the time that I smote every first-born in the land of Egypt, I consecrated every first-born in Israel, man and beast, to Myself, to be Mine, the Lord's.**

(14) **The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, saying:**

(15) **Record the Levites by ancestral house and by clan; record every male among them from the age of one month up.**

(16) **So Moses recorded them at the command of the Lord, as he was bidden.**

(13) **At the time that I smote every first-born in the land of Egypt, I consecrated every first-born in Israel:** When God smote all the Egyptian firstborns in the last of the ten Egyptian plagues, the Jewish firstborns could have perished as well. This was because they were also “first-born in the land of Egypt.” But they were spared, and therefore they now “belong to the Almighty.”

(12) **I hereby take the Levites ... in place of all the first-born:** Thus, the elevated status now conferred on the Levites represents two stages of advancement, as we shall soon explain in the following paragraphs. First, that special status passed from the Egyptian firstborns to their Jewish counterparts. And then the Jewish firstborns were replaced by the Levites.

Among all ancient peoples and cultures, the firstborn played an important role in family life. Because firstborns are chronologically the oldest of all the siblings, it was natural that they would occupy a leadership position, in physical terms (becoming the heads of the ruling class) and also spiritually (including, for example, their right and/or duty to offer sacrifices to higher powers).

The right of the firstborn also played a significant role in the conflict between Egypt and the Israelites leading up to the Exodus. As Moses

was about to begin his mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, God commanded him: “Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord: Israel is My first-born son’ ” (Exod. 4:22).<sup>12</sup> This means that the primacy of Egypt (which considered itself the “firstborn” of humanity, that is, the oldest and most advanced civilization of that era) would be transferred at the Exodus to Israel, for the future was being bequeathed to them. In this sense it is symbolic that the final and definitive Egyptian plague was none other than the death of the firstborns.

Jewish culture in Egypt adopted many important ideas from the dominant Egyptian culture. These would later be superseded by authentic Jewish values, but it could not happen immediately. Therefore, at the first stage, the Egyptian system based on the special status of the firstborns was replaced by a similar Jewish system: the Jewish firstborns were consecrated to God, and they should have become the nation’s spiritual leaders. But in fact, the Jewish spiritual leadership passed from the firstborns to the Levites.<sup>13</sup> And this was the second stage of the departure from the Egyptian spiritual system.

At the superficial level, the transition from the firstborns to the Levites was the result of worshipping the golden calf. Since it was mainly the firstborns who were responsible for maintaining communication with higher forces, it was mostly they who were considered at fault for creating and worshipping the calf – notwithstanding that members of all the other tribes (except Levi) of varied backgrounds and statuses, and not only firstborns – also participated.

The Levites in that situation, demonstrated their staunch loyalty to God and to the Torah by opposing the worship of the golden calf. Thus became obvious to the entire nation that replacing the firstborns with the Levites for the Temple service was only right and proper.

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<sup>12</sup> For details see *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, §§ 6.2 and 10.3. Gush Dan), and they will relocate instead to the north (the vicinity of today’s Tel Dan Nature Reserve), near the territories of Asher and Naphtali.

<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, certain elements of the firstborns’ special status have been preserved in Jewish tradition, most notably: the commandment to redeem the firstborns (Exod. 13:1 ff. and elsewhere), the law granting the firstborn a double share in his father’s inheritance (Deut. 21:15 ff.), and the fast of the firstborns on the eve of Passover.

However, citing the incident of the golden calf as the reason for that is a kind of "reverse logic," a post-factum justification: because the firstborns proved themselves unfit for fulfilling their role, they were removed from the position of leadership.

In truth, however, that reason alone would be insufficient to justify such a serious change in the firstborns' status. After all, the Jewish nation as a whole, and not only the firstborns, violated the Covenant by worshipping the calf. But the people were granted an opportunity for correction; they were not replaced by *en masse* by another nation.

Obviously then, the worship of the golden calf is only a pretext for transferring the firstborns' leadership status to Levites. From the very beginning the Levites were destined to become spiritual leaders; the incident of the calf only provided an occasion for the final transfer of authority.

In actuality, however, the true reason for the replacement is completely different. Namely: the fact that it was Aaron, the founder of the *kohanim* dynasty and also the chief of the Levites, who had managed to solve definitively one of mankind's most complex and challenging problems – the problem of the primacy of the firstborn. And therefore, it was only right that primacy should be given to him.

Throughout all the generations of the book of Genesis, the matter of firstborn primacy is a grievous problem. In theory, the firstborn, who is the first child in the family to overcome life's obstacles, and who passes on the experience he has so acquired to his younger siblings, should simply acknowledge and accept his higher level of responsibility. In practice, however, things usually turn out quite different, and in the history of mankind it was often the firstborn who became a source of conflict.

Beginning with the story of Cain and Abel, we see ongoing conflicts between firstborns and their younger siblings: the conflicts of Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers. The replacement of Manasseh with Ephraim in Jacob's blessing was also a source of conflict. In all these cases, the firstborn was unable to cope with the leadership entrusted to him. Many generations sought a resolution for this problem, but they all failed. Ultimately, it was necessary to abolish the special status conferred by the birthright, and to transfer the role of

the firstborns (that is, leadership, not inheritance of assets which still favored the firstborn who received a double portion) to Aaron and the Levites instead.

The source of this problem of the firstborn is revealed in the Torah's description of the birth of Adam and Eve's children. Eve says: "I have gained a male child with the help of the Lord" (Gen. 4:1). The literal translation is simply, "I have acquired a man with the Lord." The Almighty gives life, and man rises to the level of the Creator by bringing new life into the world. With the birth of Cain, Eve gained her full human status, the status of progenitor, and we should therefore understand her words as: "I have myself now acquired the status of a complete human being, and in this I am now one with the Lord."

Like all firstborns generally, Cain, by the very fact of his birth makes parents of Adam and Eve, raising them to a new, higher level, and thereby also rightfully acquiring for himself a unique, central position within the family.

With the birth of Abel, Adam and Eve's second child, Cain, the firstborn, is in a certain sense unseated from his central position. This shift will in many cases engender in the firstborn a severe emotional crisis. It is exceptionally difficult for a firstborn child to come to terms with his demotion, as it were, and with suddenly having to share his special place.

At the root of all this conflict among brothers is their claim to a common inheritance. Indeed, among people in general, the process of sharing is always potentially destructive, but among siblings this problem is especially acute, leading to strife, and sometimes even to outright war.

The conflict can be resolved only when one learns to accept his brother's successes as his own, to rejoice in them, and to feel that he and his brother are just two parts of a single whole. It was just such a positive attitude toward his younger brother Moses that Aaron, who was older, was able to achieve. The Almighty told Moses: "There is your brother Aaron the Levite. ... Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you" (Exod. 4:14). But the literal translation is yet stronger: "Upon seeing you, he will rejoice in his heart." Although Aaron is your older brother, he rejoices at your greatness.

Aaron blazed a trail to solving the problem of firstborn primacy, and helped his younger brother Moses in every way he could. Rather than competing with Moses, Aaron regarded his younger brother's activity as their joint activity.

Aaron is, as it were, "the correct and proper firstborn" – it is his spiritual heritage that underlies the solution to the problem of the firstborn for all of humanity. This is the true reason that Aaron and his Levite brothers had to replace the firstborns in the service of the Almighty.

The nation's spiritual crisis and the breakdown in the incident of the golden calf only made the need for that replacement obvious to the whole society, but most of all to the firstborns themselves, who would otherwise not have been ready to accept that replacement.

**(15) Record every male among them from the age of one month up:** One month is the minimum age at which a newborn infant is considered viable. Although we find later (Num. 4:3) that the Levites served in the Tabernacle from age thirty, they are counted even from infancy for inclusion in the Almighty's "active armed forces." Besides serving in the Temple, the Levites also became the guardians and teachers of the Tradition for all the other tribes, and their initiation therefore began much earlier, "from the age of one month up."

### § 3.3. THE FOUR GROUPS OF LEVITES (3:17-39)

כז וְלִקְהַת מִשִּׁפְחַת הָעֵמֶרְמִי וּמִשִּׁפְחַת הַיִּצְהָרִי וּמִשִּׁפְחַת הַחֻבְרֹנִי  
 וּמִשִּׁפְחַת הָעֲזִיאֵלִי אֵלֶּה הֵם מִשִּׁפְחַת הַקְּהֹתִי: כח בְּמִסְפָּר כָּל־  
 זָכָר מִבְּוֹחֵדָשׁ וּמִמְעֹלָה שְׂמַנֵּת אֲלֵפִים וְשֵׁשׁ מֵאוֹת שְׁמָרֵי מִשְׁמֶרֶת  
 הַקֹּדֶשׁ: כט מִשִּׁפְחַת בְּגִי־קֵהַת יַחֲנֹו עַל יַרְדּוֹ הַמִּשְׁכָּן תִּמְנֶנָּה: ל וְנִשְׂאִי  
 בֵּית־אָב לְמִשִּׁפְחַת הַקְּהֹתִי אֱלִיצָפֹן בֶּן־עֲזִיאֵל: לא וּמִשְׁמֶרֶתָם הָאָרְזִן  
 וְהַשְּׁלַחֵן וְהַמְנַרְהָ וְהַמְזֻבְחֹת וְכֻלֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁרְתוּ בָהֶם וְהַמְסֹדֶד  
 וְכָל עֲבֹדָתוֹ: לב וְנִשְׂאִי נְשִׂאֵי הַלְוִי אֲלֵעֶזֶר בֶּן־אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן פְּקֻדֹת שְׁמָרֵי  
 מִשְׁמֶרֶת הַקֹּדֶשׁ: לג לְמֶרְרִי מִשִּׁפְחַת הַמַּחֲלִי וּמִשִּׁפְחַת הַמוֹשִׁי אֵלֶּה  
 הֵם מִשִּׁפְחַת מְרָרִי: לד וּפְקֻדֵיהֶם בְּמִסְפָּר כָּל־זָכָר מִבְּוֹחֵדָשׁ וּמִמְעֹלָה  
 שֵׁשֶׁת אֲלָפִים וּמֵאוֹתָיִם: לה וְנִשְׂאִי בֵּית־אָב לְמִשִּׁפְחַת מְרָרִי צִוְרִיאֵל

בן־אֲבִיחֵיל עַל יָרֵד הַמִּשְׁכָּן יַחְנוּ צַפְנָה: לוֹ וּפְקֻדַת מִשְׁמֶרֶת בְּנֵי מְרָרִי  
 קָרְשִׁי הַמִּשְׁכָּן וּבְרִיחִיו וְעַמְדָּיו וְאֲדָנָיו וְכָל־כְּלָיו וְכָל עֲבֹדָתוֹ: לוֹ וְעַמְדֵי  
 הַחֹצֵר סָבִיב וְאֲדָנֵיהֶם וַיִּתְּדֵם וּמִיתָרֵיהֶם: לה וְהַחֲנִים לְפָנֵי הַמִּשְׁכָּן  
 קִדְמָה לְפָנֵי אֹהֶל־מוֹעֵד | מִזְרְחָה מִשָּׁה | וְאַהֲרֹן וּבָנָיו שְׁמָרִים מִשְׁמֶרֶת  
 הַמִּקְדָּשׁ לְמִשְׁמֶרֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהִזָּר הַקָּרֵב יוֹמֵת: לט כָּל־פְּקוּדֵי  
 הַלְוִיִּם אֲשֶׁר פָּקֹד מִשָּׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עַל־פִּי יִי לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם כָּל־זָכָר מִבֶּן־  
 תְּדֹשׁ וְיָמְעָלָה שָׁנָיִם וְעֶשְׂרִים אָלָּה:

(17) These were the sons of Levi by name: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari.

(18) These were the names of the sons of Gershon by clan: Libni and Shimei.

(19) The sons of Kohath by clan: Amram and Izhar, Hebron and Uzziel.

(20) The sons of Merari by clan: Mahli and Mushi. These were the clans of the Levites within their ancestral houses:

(21) To Gershon belonged the clan of the Libnites and the clan of the Shimeites; those were the clans of the Gershonites.

(22) The recorded entries of all their males from the age of one month up, as recorded, came to 7,500.

(23) The clans of the Gershonites were to camp behind the Tabernacle, to the west.

(24) The chieftain of the ancestral house of the Gershonites was Eliasaph son of Lael.

(25) The duties of the Gershonites in the Tent of Meeting comprised: the tabernacle, the tent, its covering, and the screen for the entrance of the Tent of Meeting;

(26) the hangings of the enclosure, the screen for the entrance of the enclosure which surrounds the Tabernacle, the cords thereof, and the altar – all the service connected with these.

(27) To Kohath belonged the clan of the Amramites, the clan of the Izharites, the clan of the Hebronites, and the clan of the Uzzielites; those were the clans of the Kohathites.

(28) All the listed males from the age of one month up came to 8,600, attending to the duties of the sanctuary.

(29) The clans of the Kohathites were to camp along the south side of the Tabernacle.

(30) The chieftain of the ancestral house of the Kohathite clans was Elizaphan son of Uzziel.

(31) Their duties comprised: the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, and the sacred utensils that were used with them, and the screen – all the service connected with these.

(32) The head chieftain of the Levites was Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, in charge of those attending to the duties of the sanctuary.

(33) To Merari belonged the clan of the Mahlites and the clan of the Mushites; those were the clans of Merari.

(34) The recorded entries of all their males from the age of one month up came to 6,200.

(35) The chieftain of the ancestral house of the clans of Merari was Zuriel son of Abihail. They were to camp along the north side of the Tabernacle.

(36) The assigned duties of the Merarites comprised: the planks of the Tabernacle, its bars, posts, and sockets, and all its furnishings – all the service connected with these;

(37) also the posts around the enclosure and their sockets, pegs, and cords.

(38) Those who were to camp before the Tabernacle, in front – before the Tent of Meeting, on the east – were Moses and Aaron and his sons, attending to the duties of the sanctuary, as a duty on behalf of the Israelites; and any outsider who encroached was to be put to death.

(39) All the Levites who were recorded, whom at the Lord's command Moses and Aaron recorded by their clans, all the males from the age of one month up, came to 22,000.

(17) **These were the sons of Levi by name: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari:** The Levites are counted separately by families, which was not the case in the census of the other tribes. Thus, the tribe of Levi consists, we could say, of three “sub-tribes” – Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. (But sometimes they are called, simply, “tribes”; see, e.g., Num. 4:18, where

“the group of Kohathite clans” translates literally as “the tribe of the families of Kohath.”)

Later the three Levite groups will function as independent units, each marching separately. But there is yet one more group of Levites, consisting of Moses, Aaron, and their families, who, although they were Kohathites, are singled out as special. Thus, effectively, there are four groups of Levites, each occupying one side of the Tabernacle, corresponding to the four camps of all the other tribes.

Thus, in the wilderness there are three levels of holiness: the “camp” of the Tabernacle itself, surrounded by the camp of the Levites, and surrounding them the camp of the remaining tribes. These three camps and their respective levels of holiness are distinguished by the corresponding levels of purity required of persons wishing to be present in each camp (see Num. 5:1-4, and our commentary there).

**(23) The clans of the Gershonites were to camp behind the Tabernacle, to the west:** That is, alongside the sons of Rachel. Gershon was Levi’s firstborn, but he had to concede the leadership position to Moses and Aaron who were grandsons of Kohath, Gershon’s younger brother.

**(24) The chieftain of the ancestral house of the Gershonites was Eliasaph son of Lael:** Each Levite family has its own chieftain, specified by name, in the same manner that each of the other tribes had its chieftain. This underscores that each Levite family is an entirely independent entity.

**(25) The duties of the Gershonites in the Tent of Meeting comprised:** the tabernacle, the tent: The Gershonites transport the coverings of the Tabernacle and the hangings of its enclosure (Exod. 26:1 ff.; 27:9 ff.).

**(29) The clans of the Kohathites were to camp along the south side:** That is, alongside the camp of Reuben. Like Reuben and Simon, the Kohath family feels slighted, because most of the Kohathites remained just ordinary Levites, while Moses and Aaron, who were Kohathites too, received leadership positions. We see already brewing here the discontent that will later manifest in the rebellion of Korah (a Kohathite).

thite), in which members of the tribes of Reuben also participated (see Num. 16:1-17:27).

**(31) Their duties comprised ... the sacred utensils:** They transport the most important and sacred components of the Temple. Unlike the Gershonites and Merarites, who transported their parts of the Tabernacle on wagons, the Kohathites carried the Temple vessels on their shoulders.

**(32) The head chieftain of the Levites was Eleazar son of Aaron the priest:** All the activities of the Levites are managed and supervised by the *kohen*.

**(35-36) Merari was ... to camp along the north side of the Tabernacle. The assigned duties of the Merarites comprised:** the planks: Merari was the youngest of Levi's sons. The Merarites were responsible for carrying and installing the heaviest parts of the Tabernacle – the Tabernacle planks and the courtyard posts. The Merarites were positioned on the north side of the Tabernacle, adjacent to the camp of Dan, which also included Asher and Naphtali. These were sons of Jacob's handmaidens.

**(38) Before the Tent of Meeting, on the east – were Moses and Aaron and his sons:** The entrance to the Tabernacle was from the east, where Moses and Aaron and their families were positioned. Next to them was the camp of Judah, which included the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun. This created a connection between spiritual and military leadership, which, according to the Midrash, contributed to a more advanced level of Torah study among the members of these tribes. These tribes later produced many leading Torah scholars.

With reference to these camp positions, the Midrash cites the aphorism: "Woe unto the wicked, woe unto his neighbor. Good for the righteous, good for his neighbor." That is, the righteous and the wicked each influence their neighbors accordingly. The proximity of the Kohathites and the Reubenites ended badly, in a rebellion that had to be put down (Num. 16:1), whereas Issachar and Zebulun, who camped close to Moses and Aaron, went on to be wise and learned in Torah.

**(39) All the Levites who were recorded ... came to 22,000:** The Levites were the smallest of all the tribes. When enumerating all the other tribes, the numbers were rounded to fifty, since it was a question of military units. But the counts of the Levites, on the contrary, are precise numbers, as will soon become apparent when they are taken in exchange for the firstborns (see Num. 3: 40-51).

However, if we tally the numbers of the three Levite families as given here, we get  $7,500 + 8,600 + 6,200 = 22,300$ , not 22,000 as reported in this verse. Tradition states that those additional three hundred Levites were themselves firstborns, who were thus already designated for Temple service, and therefore could not take the place of other firstborns.

### § 3.4. COUNTING THE FIRSTBORNS AND REPLACING THEM WITH THE LEVITES (3:40-51)

מ וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה פֶּקֶד כָּל־בְּכֹר זָכָר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִבְּוֹחַדָּשׁ  
וּמֵעֵלָה וְשֵׂא אֶת מִסְפַּר שְׂמֹתָם: מֵא וְלִקְחֹתָ אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם לִי אֲנִי יי תַּחַת  
כָּל־בְּכֹר בְּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֵת בְּהֵמַת הַלְוִיִּם תַּחַת כָּל־בְּכוֹר בְּבֵהֶמַת  
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: מֵב וַיִּפְקֹד מֹשֶׁה כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי אֹתוֹ אֶת־כָּל־בְּכוֹר בְּבְנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל: מֵג וַיְהִי כָל־בְּכוֹר זָכָר בְּמִסְפַּר שְׂמֹת מִבְּוֹחַדָּשׁ וּמֵעֵלָה  
לִפְקֻדֵיהֶם שְׁנַיִם וְעֶשְׂרִים אֶלֶף שְׁלֹשָׁה וְשִׁבְעִים וּמֵאָתַיִם:

מֵד וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: מֵה קַח אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם תַּחַת כָּל־בְּכוֹר  
בְּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־בְּהֵמַת הַלְוִיִּם תַּחַת בְּהֵמַתָּם וְהִיוּ־לִי הַלְוִיִּם אֲנִי  
יי: מו וְאֵת פְּדוּיֵי הַשְּׁלֹשָׁה וְהַשְּׁבַעִים וְהַמֵּאָתַיִם הָעֵדֻפִים עַל־הַלְוִיִּם  
מִבְּכוֹר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: מֵז וְלִקְחֹתָ חֲמִשָּׁת חֲמִשָּׁת שְׂקָלִים לְגִלְגָּלֶת בְּשֵׁקֶל  
הַקֹּדֶשׁ תִּקַּח עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה הַשֵּׁקֶל: מֵח וּנְתַתָּה הַכֶּסֶף לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבְנָיו  
פְּדוּיֵי הָעֵדֻפִים בְּהֵם: מֵט וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת כֶּסֶף הַפְּדוּיִם מֵאֵת הָעֵדֻפִים  
עַל פְּדוּיֵי הַלְוִיִּם: נ מֵאֵת בְּכוֹר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָקַח אֶת־הַכֶּסֶף חֲמִשָּׁה  
וְשִׁשִּׁים וְשָׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת וְאַלֶּף בְּשֵׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ: נֵא וַיִּתֵּן מֹשֶׁה אֶת־כֶּסֶף  
הַפְּדוּיִם לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבְנָיו עַל־פִּי יי כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי אֶת־מֹשֶׁה:

(40) The Lord said to Moses: Record every first-born male of the Israelite people from the age of one month up, and make a list of their names;

(41) and take the Levites for Me, the Lord, in place of every first-born among the Israelite people, and the cattle of the Levites in place of every first-born among the cattle of the Israelites.

(42) So Moses recorded all the first-born among the Israelites, as the Lord had commanded him.

(43) All the first-born males as listed by name, recorded from the age of one month up, came to 22,273.

(44) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

(45) Take the Levites in place of all the first-born among the Israelite people, and the cattle of the Levites in place of their cattle; and the Levites shall be Mine, the Lord's.

(46) And as the redemption price of the 273 Israelite first-born over and above the number of the Levites,

(47) take five shekels per head – take this by the sanctuary weight, twenty gerahs to the shekel –

(48) and give the money to Aaron and his sons as the redemption price for those who are in excess.

(49) So Moses took the redemption money from those over and above the ones redeemed by the Levites;

(50) he took the money from the first-born of the Israelites, 1,365 sanctuary shekels.

(51) And Moses gave the redemption money to Aaron and his sons at the Lord's bidding, as the Lord had commanded Moses.

**(40) Record every first-born male of the Israelite people from the age of one month up:** As with the Levites, all firstborns at least one month old are included in the count, because they acquire their firstborn status immediately from birth. (But as mentioned previously, a newborn is considered viable only after thirty days.)

**(47) Take five shekels per head:** This is the established, fixed amount of silver for redeeming a firstborn (Lev. 27:6).

Thus, as the final calculation, we have: 22,273 first-born male children, minus 22,000 Levites = 273 additional firstborns who cannot be redeemed by the Levites taken in their place. Five shekels for each of those comes to  $5 \times 273 = 1,365$  shekels.

### § 3.5. THE DUTIES OF THE KOHATHITES:

#### THE COVERINGS OF THE TEMPLE VESSELS (4:1–20)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: ב נִשְׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי קָהָת מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי לֵוִי לְמִשְׁפַּחְתְּם לְבֵית אֲבֹתְכֶם: ג מִזֹּנֹת שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וְמַעְלָה וְעַד בְּזַחְמָשִׁים שָׁנָה כֹּל־בָּא לַעֲבֹד מְלָאכָה בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: ד זֹאת עֲבַדְתָּ בְּנֵי־קָהָת בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד קֹדֶשׁ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים: ה וּבָא אַהֲרֹן וּבָנָיו בְּנִסְעַת הַמִּחֲנֶה וְהוֹרְדוּ אֶת פְּרֻכַת הַמִּסָּךְ וְכֹסֵי־בָהּ אֶת אֲרוֹן הָעֵדוּת: ו וּנְתַנּוּ עָלָיו כֹּסֵי עוֹר תַּחֲשׁ וּפְרָשׁוּ בְּגַד־כָּלִיל תְּכֵלֶת מִלְּמַעְלָה וְשָׂמוּ בְּדֵיו: ז וְעַל שְׁלֹתֵן הַפָּנִים יִפְרָשׁוּ בְּגַד תְּכֵלֶת וּנְתַנּוּ עָלָיו אֶת־הַקַּעֲרֹת וְאֶת־הַכַּפֹּת וְאֶת־הַמְּנַקִּיֹת וְאֶת קִשּׁוֹת הַנֶּסֶךְ וְלַחֵם הַתַּמִּיד עָלָיו יִהְיֶה: ח וּפְרָשׁוּ עֲלֵיהֶם בְּגַד תּוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי וְכֹסוּ אֹתוֹ בַּמִּכְסָה עוֹר תַּחֲשׁ וְשָׂמוּ אֶת־בְּדֵיו: ט וְלָקְחוּ בְּגַד תְּכֵלֶת וְכֹסוּ אֶת־מִנְרַת הַמָּאוֹר וְאֶת־נִרְתָּיהָ וְאֶת־מְלַקְחֶיהָ וְאֶת־מַחְתֹּתֶיהָ וְאֶת כָּל־כְּלֵי שְׂמֹנֶה אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁרְתוּ־לָהּ בָּהֶם: י וּנְתַנּוּ אֹתָהּ וְאֶת־כָּל־כְּלֵיהָ אֶל־מִכְסָה עוֹר תַּחֲשׁ וּנְתַנּוּ עַל־הַמוֹט: יא וְעַל מִזְבַּח הַזֶּהָב יִפְרָשׁוּ בְּגַד תְּכֵלֶת וְכֹסוּ אֹתוֹ בַּמִּכְסָה עוֹר תַּחֲשׁ וְשָׂמוּ אֶת־בְּדֵיו: יב וְלָקְחוּ אֶת־כָּל־כְּלֵי הַשֵּׁרֶת אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁרְתוּ־בָם בַּקֹּדֶשׁ וּנְתַנּוּ אֶל־בְּגַד תְּכֵלֶת וְכֹסוּ אוֹתָם בַּמִּכְסָה עוֹר תַּחֲשׁ וּנְתַנּוּ עַל־הַמוֹט: יג וּדְשְׁנוּ אֶת־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וּפְרָשׁוּ עָלָיו בְּגַד אַרְגָּמָן: יד וּנְתַנּוּ עָלָיו אֶת־כָּל־כְּלָיו אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁרְתוּ עָלָיו בָּהֶם אֶת־הַמַּחְתֹּת אֶת־הַמִּזְלָגֹת וְאֶת־הַיַּעֲיִים וְאֶת־הַמְּזֻרְקֹת כֹּל כְּלֵי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וּפְרָשׁוּ עָלָיו כֹּסֵי עוֹר תַּחֲשׁ וְשָׂמוּ בְּדֵיו: טו וְכִלָּה אַהֲרֹן וּבָנָיו לְכַסֹּת אֶת־הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֶת־כָּל־כְּלֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּנִסְעַת הַמִּחֲנֶה וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יָבֹאוּ בְּנֵי קָהָת לְשֵׂאת וּלֹא־יָגִעוּ אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּמִתּוֹ אֵלֶּה מִשָּׂא בְּנֵי־קָהָת בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: טז וּפְקַדְתָּ אֶלְעָזָר בְּזֶ־אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן שֹׁמֵן הַמָּאוֹר וּקְטַרְתָּ הַסַּמִּים וּמִנְחַת הַתַּמִּיד וְשֹׁמֵן הַמִּשְׁחָה פְּקֻדֹת כָּל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ בַּקֹּדֶשׁ וּבְכָלֵיו:

י וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: יח אֶל־תִּכְרִיתוּ אֶת־שִׁבְט  
 מִשְׁפַּחַת הַקֹּהֲתִי מִתּוֹךְ הַלְוִיִּם: יט וְזָאת | עֲשׂוּ לָהֶם וְחָיו וְלֹא יָמָתוּ  
 בְּגִשְׁתֶּם אֶת־קֹדֶשׁ הַקְּדָשִׁים אֲהֲרֹן וּבָנָיו יָבִאוּ וְשָׂמוּ אוֹתָם אִישׁ אִישׁ  
 עַל־עֲבֹדָתוֹ וְאֶל־מִשְׁאֹו: כ וְלֹא־יָבִאוּ לְרֵאוֹת כְּבִלְעַ אֶת־הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּמָתוּ:

(1) **The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:**

(2) **Take a [separate] census of the Kohathites among the Levites, by the clans of their ancestral house,**

(3) **from the age of thirty years up to the age of fifty, all who are subject to service, to perform tasks for the Tent of Meeting.**

(4) **This is the responsibility of the Kohathites in the Tent of Meeting: the most sacred objects.**

(5) **At the breaking of camp, Aaron and his sons shall go in and take down the screening curtain and cover the Ark of the Pact with it.**

(6) **They shall lay a covering of dolphin skin over it and spread a cloth of pure blue on top; and they shall put its poles in place.**

(7) **Over the table of display they shall spread a blue cloth; they shall place upon it the bowls, the ladles, the jars, and the libation jugs; and the regular bread shall rest upon it.**

(8) **They shall spread over these a crimson cloth which they shall cover with a covering of dolphin skin; and they shall put the poles in place.**

(9) **Then they shall take a blue cloth and cover the lampstand for lighting, with its lamps, its tongs, and its fire pans, as well as all the oil vessels that are used in its service.**

(10) **They shall put it and all its furnishings into a covering of dolphin skin, which they shall then place on a carrying frame.**

(11) **Next they shall spread a blue cloth over the altar of gold and cover it with a covering of dolphin skin; and they shall put its poles in place.**

(12) **They shall take all the service vessels with which the service in the sanctuary is performed, put them into a blue cloth and cover them with a covering of dolphin skin, which they shall then place on a carrying frame.**

(13) They shall remove the ashes from the [copper] altar and spread a purple cloth over it.

(14) Upon it they shall place all the vessels that are used in its service: the fire pans, the flesh hooks, the scrapers, and the basins – all the vessels of the altar – and over it they shall spread a covering of dolphin skin; and they shall put its poles in place.

(15) When Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sacred objects and all the furnishings of the sacred objects at the breaking of camp, only then shall the Kohathites come and lift them, so that they do not come in contact with the sacred objects and die. These things in the Tent of Meeting shall be the portorage of the Kohathites.

(16) Responsibility shall rest with Eleazar son of Aaron the priest for the lighting oil, the aromatic incense, the regular meal offering, and the anointing oil – responsibility for the whole Tabernacle and for everything consecrated that is in it or in its vessels.

(17) The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:

(18) Do not let the group of Kohathite clans be cut off from the Levites.

(19) Do this with them, that they may live and not die when they approach the most sacred objects: let Aaron and his sons go in and assign each of them to his duties and to his portorage.

(20) But let not [the Kohathites] go inside and witness the dismantling of the sanctuary, lest they die.

(2) **Take a [separate] census of the Kohathites:** In the previous chapter (Num. 2:21-37), where the Levite families were enumerated, they were listed in order of seniority: first Gershon, who was Levi's first-born, then Kohath, and then the youngest, Merari. But now, in the descriptions of the Temple service of the three Levite families, the service of Kohath is mentioned first, because it is the most important: transporting the Temple vessels.

(3) **All who are subject to service, to perform tasks for the Tent of Meeting:** Above (Num. 1:3), in the census of the entire nation, we

read: “All those in Israel who are able to bear arms” – or, more literally, “All who go out to do *military* service.” And in this verse too, the literal meaning is: “All who are subject to military service.” Thus, the Levites are designated as “an army within the army.” They are responsible for maintaining the nation’s spiritual epicenter.

**From the age of thirty years:** The Levite period of service is from thirty to fifty years, which contrasts with that of the other tribes, whose soldiers were counted from twenty years and above, with no upper limit. The starting age of the Levites is higher (thirty vs. twenty) because their service in the Temple requires not only physical strength, but a higher level of understanding and spiritual maturity.

**(3) Up to the age of fifty:** After fifty years a person’s physical strength begins to wane, and he is therefore no longer fit to serve in the Temple, where the overriding aim is always to increase strength, never to reduce it.

**(4) This is the responsibility of the Kohathites:** the most sacred objects: Literally, “the Holy of Holies,” which refers not only to the premises of the sanctuary within the Tabernacle (where the Ark of the Covenant stood), but to all the Temple vessels, which have a special degree of holiness. Because the Kohathites are Moses’ and Aaron’s closest relatives, they transport the most important objects. At their level of holiness, the responsibility is so great that improper actions can lead to death.

**(5) At the breaking of camp, Aaron and his sons shall go in:** All the work of covering the Temple vessels is performed only by Aaron and his sons. It is they who are responsible for revealing and concealing holiness. No outsiders are allowed even to be present at that time.

**And take down the screening curtain and cover the Ark of the Pact with it:** The curtain that concealed the Holy of Holies, including the Ark, now becomes a covering for the Ark. Each of the other most sacred Temple vessels (the Table, the Menorah, the Altar of Incense), had its own covering specially made for it. However, the Ark of the Covenant, so exalted as it was, required not just any cover, but a cover that was itself a sacred vessel of the Tabernacle. Thus, here the “Holy” is used as a covering for the “Holy of Holies.”

**Aaron and his sons shall go in and take down the screening curtain and cover the Ark of the Pact with it:** We will learn below (Num. 4:20) that the Levites are not allowed even to see the sacred vessels, while even the *kohanim* are not allowed to see the Ark. Rather, they must lower the curtain that obscures the Holy of Holies, all the while averting their gaze, until the Ark which stands behind the curtain is completely covered and concealed from view. Only then may they begin to prepare the Ark for transporting.

**(6) They shall lay a covering of dolphin skin over it:** We might wonder why the Torah goes into such detail when describing the procedure for transporting the Ark, given that it is not a feature of the actual Temple service, but seemingly nothing more than an incidental, operational aspect. But the point here is to emphasize the all-important spiritual concepts embodied in these actions.

Since the Temple is a microcosm of the universe, we may infer by analogy from the requirement to conceal its sanctity, that in our everyday life too holiness must not be kept constantly open to view. There must be alternate periods of revelation and concealment, of intimacy and estrangement. This is true of married life,<sup>14</sup> in God's relationship with the people of Israel, and in the relationship between God and man.

As we shall see later, increased holiness is not necessarily suitable to every situation. Sometimes, holiness should be concealed in order to guarantee that the act of creation is going unassisted, undisturbed, and fully independent.<sup>15</sup> Such self-sufficiency and independence are essential attributes of the proper divinely development of the world.

**They shall lay a covering of dolphin skin over it and spread a cloth of pure blue on top:** The animal skin is for protection, while the azure cloth contributes an air of grandeur. The blue color of the

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<sup>14</sup> In Jewish tradition, this is expressed in the requirement that a couple must keep distance between them during the wife's menstruation and immediately thereafter. At that time they are prohibited from having even very minimal physical contact.

<sup>15</sup> See below, § 5.

cloth, like that of the sky that it mirrors, corresponds to the attribute of Chesed, “kindness, beneficence, grace.”

**And they shall put its poles in place:** In Exodus (25:15) we read: “The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark: they shall not be removed from it.” What then is this verse saying? Aren’t the poles already permanently in place?

Here, putting the Ark’s poles in place means moving them to a position convenient for carrying. When the Ark stands in the Tabernacle, its poles, while they remain in the rings, are completely shifted towards the curtain and resting against it. That is, the poles establish a fixed distance between the Ark and the curtain, while the fact that they must never be removed emphasizes the constant remoteness of the Ark, as a symbol of the transcendence of Divinity. But in the stowed position, after the Ark is covered with skins and cloth, the poles are shifted such that they protrude evenly from either side of the Ark, so that the sons of Kohath can avoid making physical contact with the Ark while carrying it.

**(7) Over the table of display ... and the regular bread shall rest upon it:** The bread of display, which symbolizes the material success of the Jewish people, must always remain on the table, even while the nation is on the march.

**(7-8) Over the table of display they shall spread a blue cloth ... over these a crimson cloth which they shall cover with a covering of dolphin skin:** A cover of leather protects the blue and crimson coverings of the table. But unlike the Ark, which had an additional blue covering placed over its leather protection, there is no aspect of external splendor for these other vessels.

The celestial blue color symbolizes the attribute of *Chesed*, “grace,” while the earthy red represents the attribute of *Din*, “severe judgment.” (The word *adom*, “red,” derives from the same root as *adamah*, “earth,” and also *dam*, “blood.”) The table’s coverings combine the aspects of both of these colors. That is, a successful economic and material life, which is what the table symbolizes, must integrate both mercy and judgment.

**(8) And they shall put the poles in place:** The purpose of the poles of the table and the golden altar (the altar of incense), unlike those of

the Ark, was only for carrying those vessels. Thus, while those vessels stood stationary in the Tabernacle, the poles were removed from their rings, to be reinserted once again only in preparation for carrying. Because the aspects that these vessels represent are not transcendental, they do not require maintaining a constant sense of distance.

**(9-10) Then they shall take a blue cloth and cover the lampstand ... They shall put it ... into a covering of dolphin skin:** The Temple lampstand, the Menorah, which symbolizes wisdom, has only a covering of blue, the celestial color of grace.

**(10) A covering of dolphin skin, which they shall then place on a carrying frame:** Unlike the other Temple vessels, the lampstand did not have rings and poles for transporting it; it was carried instead inside a leather case.

In its description of how the lamp was to be constructed (Exod. 25:31), the Torah emphasized that it had to be cast from a single slab of gold (unlike the other Temple vessels that were assembled as interconnected parts). This reflects the idea of human wisdom as a single, integrated view of the world, not a patchwork of diverse elements. The lamp therefore has no subsidiary parts, not even poles for transporting it. Instead, it is carried in a leather case.

**(11) Next they shall spread a blue cloth over the altar of gold and cover it with a covering of dolphin skin ... They shall take all the service vessels ... put them into a blue cloth:** The golden altar was used daily for burning incense in the Temple, invoking the Almighty's mercy.<sup>16</sup> The covering for the golden altar and for its vessels are of blue color, which is associated with the attribute of *Chesed*.

**(13) They shall remove the ashes from the [copper] altar and spread a purple cloth over it:** This is the outer altar of copper, upon which animal sacrifices were burnt. Because it is associated with the shedding of blood, its covering is purple, that is, close to red, an earthy color associated with the category of *Din*.

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<sup>16</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 26.5.

**(16) Responsibility shall rest with Eleazar son of Aaron the priest:** Eleazar was the chief of all the Levites (Num. 3:32), but he directly supervised the work of the Kohathites, who were responsible for the most important parts of the Tabernacle.

**(16) Responsibility shall rest with Eleazar son of Aaron the priest for the lighting oil, the aromatic incense:** Aaron and his sons have their own transport duties. They are responsible for carrying the “service materials” themselves: the incense that is offered on the golden altar, and the oil that is kindled in the lampstand.

**(18) Do not let the group of Kohathite clans be cut off from the Levites:** The work that the Kohathites perform is downright dangerous. Unlike the sons of Aaron, the Kohathites are barred from actually touching the Temple vessels. They come perilously close to the “high voltage,” and can die simply by making physical contact with it.<sup>17</sup>

**(19) Do this with them, that they may live and not die when they approach the most sacred objects: let Aaron and his sons go in and assign each of them to his duties:** Unless the instructions of the *kohen* are obeyed strictly, direct contact with holiness can be fatal.

**(20) But let not [the Kohathites] go inside and witness the dismantling of the sanctuary, lest they die:** The Kohathites must remain keenly aware that they transport not just ordinary material objects that are visible to the naked eye, but objects of true holiness – manifestations of Divinity that is invisible.

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<sup>17</sup> An actual instance of death caused by chance physical contact with the Ark is found in the incident of King David bringing the Ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:7).



**WEEKLY  
PORTION 2**

**NASO**



## § 4. THE TRANSPORTING OF THE TABERNACLE BY THE LEVITES

### § 4.1. THE DUTIES OF THE GERSHONITES AND MERARITES

(4:21-33)

כא וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: כִּבְנֵי נֹשֵׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי גֵרְשׁוֹן גַּם־  
הֵם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם: כִּג מִבְּנֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וּמֵעֵלָה עַד בְּן־  
חַמְשִׁים שָׁנָה תִּפְקְדוּ אוֹתָם כָּל־הַבָּא לְצַבָּא לְצַבָּא לְעַבְדַּ עֲבֹדָה בְּאֹהֶל  
מוֹעֵד: כד זֹאת עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁפַּחַת הַגֵּרְשׁוֹנִי לְעַבְדַּ וּלְמִשְׁאָ: כה וְנִשְׂאוּ אֶת־  
יְרִיעַת הַמִּשְׁכָּן וְאֶת־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד מִכֹּסֶהוּ וּמִכֶּסֶה הַתְּחַשׁ אֲשֶׁר־עָלְיוֹ  
מִלְמַעְלָה וְאֶת־מִסְדֵּךְ פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: כו וְאֵת קַלְעֵי הַחֹצֵר וְאֶת־מִסְדֵּךְ |  
פֶּתַח | שַׁעַר הַחֹצֵר אֲשֶׁר עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן וְעַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ סָבִיב וְאֵת מִיתְרֵיהֶם  
וְאֶת־כָּל־כְּלֵי עֲבֹדְתָם וְאֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה לָהֶם וְעַבְדוּ: כז עַל־פִּי  
אֹהֶרֶן וּבְנָיו תְּהִיָּה כָל־עֲבֹדַת בְּנֵי הַגֵּרְשׁוֹנִי לְכָל־מִשְׁאָם וְלִכְלֵ עֲבֹדְתָם  
וּפְקֻדְתָם עֲלֵהֶם בְּמִשְׁמֶרֶת אֵת כָּל־מִשְׁאָם: כח זֹאת עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁפַּחַת  
בְּנֵי הַגֵּרְשׁוֹנִי בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּמִשְׁמֶרֶתָם בְּיַד אֵיתָמָר בְּזֶן־אֹהֶרֶן הַכֹּהֵן:

(21) The Lord spoke to Moses:

(22) Take a census of the Gershonites also, by their ancestral house and by their clans.

(23) Record them from the age of thirty years up to the age of fifty, all who are subject to service in the performance of tasks for the Tent of Meeting.

**(24) These are the duties of the Gershonite clans as to labor and portorage:**

**(25) they shall carry the cloths of the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting with its covering, the covering of dolphin skin that is on top of it, and the screen for the entrance of the Tent of Meeting;**

**(26) the hangings of the enclosure, the screen at the entrance of the gate of the enclosure that surrounds the Tabernacle, the cords thereof, and the altar, and all their service equipment and all their accessories; and they shall perform the service.**

**(27) All the duties of the Gershonites, all their portorage and all their service, shall be performed on orders from Aaron and his sons; you shall make them responsible for attending to all their portorage.**

**(28) Those are the duties of the Gershonite clans for the Tent of Meeting; they shall attend to them under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest.**

**(29) As for the Merarites, you shall record them by the clans of their ancestral house;**

**(30) you shall record them from the age of thirty years up to the age of fifty, all who are subject to service in the performance of the duties for the Tent of Meeting.**

**(31) These are their portorage tasks in connection with their various duties for the Tent of Meeting: the planks, the bars, the posts, and the sockets of the Tabernacle;**

**(32) the posts around the enclosure and their sockets, pegs, and cords – all these furnishings and their service: you shall list by name the objects that are their portorage tasks.**

**(33) Those are the duties of the Merarite clans, pertaining to their various duties in the Tent of Meeting under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest.**

**(21-22) The Lord spoke to Moses:** Take a census of the Gershonites also: It is important to note that the standard biblical chapter

divisions in general use today, even for the five books of the Torah, are of non-Jewish, European origin. Jewish tradition never had (or needed) those divisions, but eventually adopted them in limited measure only as a matter of convenience and nothing more. In some cases, in fact, those divisions run counter to the Jewish understanding of the Scriptures, and here we have a case in point.

In the European perception of the book of Numbers, the distribution of tasks across the three Levite families is a single topic. Chapter 4 therefore simply continues here.<sup>18</sup> But in the Hebrew division of the Torah text, a new weekly portion, *Naso*, begins with this passage; that is, it is seen as a new topic.

This division can be explained as follows. The Kohathites carry the Temple vessels as whole objects that are not taken apart; on the contrary, in the process of packing the sacred vessels, as described in the previous section, the Kohathites cover those vessels, and by virtue of that concealment add a further dimension of wholeness to them.

Contrarily, in preparation for transporting their parts of the Tabernacle, the Gershonites and Merarites dismantle those components – the Tent of Meeting and the enclosure – into their constituent elements: sockets, planks, and coverings, which they then transport in that form.

Thus, the family of Kohath is associated with the “stable, stationary” aspect of the Temple service – those parts that can stand on their own just as they are – while Gershon and Merari are occupied with the “collapsible, nomadic” aspect – the Temple components as seen from the perspective of the journey across the wilderness.

This dichotomy corresponds to the essential difference between the *Bemidbar* weekly portion just ended, and the *Naso* portion that begins here. As noted earlier, the book of Numbers begins with the *Bemidbar*

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<sup>18</sup> The division of the text of the Torah into chapters is of non-Jewish origin. It was introduced by Christian monks in the thirteenth century, when they were preparing the first concordances of the Bible. Those divisions were accepted into the Jewish editions of the Tanakh only later, and thus, from the Jewish point of view, they have no real status as “logical separators.” For more details see “The Division of the Torah Text into Modern Chapters” section in the *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Genesis.

portion, in which there is still order and stasis, after which, in portion *Naso*, the movement and the crises associated with it begin.

Any departure from a stable existence to the world of the road is necessarily fraught with a serious degradation of order and stability. The underlying message of the book of Numbers is that each of us must acquire in our lives a realization and an understanding of the ideas of structure and order. Then, when crises eventually descend upon us as they inevitably will, we can overcome those crises and return to the more ordered state that we have acknowledged previously as the ideal.

Thus, the Jewish approach to dividing the Torah text into weekly portions emphasizes that the people's journey through the wilderness had a goal and a purpose, which lay in the internal dynamics of the situation – in overcoming the crises, and adjusting and correcting all aspects and elements of the national mission.

**(24-31) The Gershonite clans ... shall carry the cloths ... As for the Merarites ... the planks:** The Kohathites carried the most sacred objects, which were not, however, particularly heavy. The Gershonites were entrusted with the less important but heavier parts. And the last of the three Levite families, the Merarites, transported the heaviest elements of the Tabernacle.

On the other hand, however, the Gershonites and Merarites received wagons for carrying their loads, “but to the Kohathites he did not give any wagons; since theirs was the service of the most sacred objects, their portorage was by shoulder” (Num. 7:9).

**(28) Under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest:** The Kohathites served under Eleazar, the older of Aaron's two remaining sons after the tragedy that took the lives of Nadab and Abihu (see Num. 3:4). The Gershonites and Merarites were under the leadership of Ithamar, Eleazar's younger brother.

## § 4.2. COUNTING THE LEVITES ELIGIBLE FOR SERVICE

(4:34-49)

כט בני מִרְרֵי לְמִשְׁפַּחְתֶּם לְבֵית־אֲבֹתְכֶם תִּפְקֹד אֹתָם: ל מִבְּנֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וְזִמְעָלָה וְעַד בְּנֵי־חֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה תִּפְקְדֶם כָּל־הַבָּא לְצָבָא לְעֵבֶד אֶת־עֲבֹדַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: לא וְזֹאת מִשְׁמֶרֶת מִשְׁאֵם לְכָל־עֲבֹדְתֶם בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד קִרְשֵׁי הַמִּשְׁכָּן וּבְרִיחָיו וְעִמּוּדָיו וְאֲדָנָיו: לב וְעִמּוּדֵי הַחֲצֵר סָבִיב וְאֲדָנֵיהֶם וְיִתְדֹתֶם וּמִיתְרֵיהֶם לְכָל־כְּלֵיהֶם וּלְכָל עֲבֹדְתֶם וּבִשְׂמַת תִּפְקְדוּ אֶת־כָּלִי מִשְׁמֶרֶת מִשְׁאֵם: לג וְזֹאת עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁפַּחַת בְּנֵי מִרְרֵי לְכָל־עֲבֹדְתֶם בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד בִּיד אֵיתָמָר בְּנֹ־אֹהֶרֶן הַכֹּהֵן: לד וַיִּפְקֹד מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן וּנְשִׂאֵי הָעֵדָה אֶת־בְּנֵי הַקְּהָלִי לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם וּלְבֵית אֲבֹתָם: לה מִבְּנֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וְזִמְעָלָה וְעַד בְּנֵי־חֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה כָּל־הַבָּא לְצָבָא לְעֵבֶדָה בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: לו וַיְהִיו פְּקֻדֵיהֶם לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם אֲלָפִים שֶׁבַע מֵאוֹת וְחֲמִשִּׁים: לו אֵלֶּה פְּקוּדֵי מִשְׁפַּחַת הַקְּהָלִי כָּל־הָעֵבֶד בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר פָּקַד מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עַל־פִּי יי בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה:

לה וּפְקוּדֵי בְּנֵי גִרְשׁוֹן לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם וּלְבֵית אֲבֹתָם: לט מִבְּנֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וְזִמְעָלָה וְעַד בְּנֵי־חֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה כָּל־הַבָּא לְצָבָא לְעֵבֶדָה בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: מ וַיְהִיו פְּקֻדֵיהֶם לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם אֲלָפִים וְשֵׁשׁ מֵאוֹת וּשְׁלֹשִׁים: מא אֵלֶּה פְּקוּדֵי מִשְׁפַּחַת בְּנֵי גִרְשׁוֹן כָּל־הָעֵבֶד בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר פָּקַד מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עַל־פִּי יי: מב וּפְקוּדֵי מִשְׁפַּחַת בְּנֵי מִרְרֵי לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם: מג מִבְּנֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וְזִמְעָלָה וְעַד בְּנֵי חֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה כָּל־הַבָּא לְצָבָא לְעֵבֶדָה בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: מד וַיְהִיו פְּקֻדֵיהֶם לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם שְׁלֹשָׁת אֲלָפִים וּמֵאוֹת: מה אֵלֶּה פְּקוּדֵי מִשְׁפַּחַת בְּנֵי מִרְרֵי אֲשֶׁר פָּקַד מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עַל־פִּי יי בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה: מו כָּל־הַפְּקֻדִים אֲשֶׁר פָּקַד מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן וּנְשִׂאֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם וּלְבֵית אֲבֹתָם: מז מִבְּנֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וְזִמְעָלָה וְעַד בְּנֵי־חֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה כָּל־הַבָּא לְעֵבֶד עֲבֹדַת עֲבֹדָה וְעֵבֶדְתָּ מִשָּׂא בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: מח וַיְהִיו פְּקֻדֵיהֶם שְׁמֹנֶת אֲלָפִים וְחֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת וּשְׁמֹנִים: מט עַל־פִּי יי פָּקַד אוֹתָם בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה אִישׁ אִישׁ עַל־עֲבֹדְתוֹ וְעַל־מִשְׁאֵוֹ וּפְקוּדֵיו אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יי אֶת־מֹשֶׁה:

(34) So Moses, Aaron, and the chieftains of the community recorded the Kohathites by the clans of their ancestral house,

**(35) from the age of thirty years up to the age of fifty, all who were subject to service for work relating to the Tent of Meeting.**

**(36) Those recorded by their clans came to 2,750.**

**(37) That was the enrollment of the Kohathite clans, all those who performed duties relating to the Tent of Meeting, whom Moses and Aaron recorded at the command of the Lord through Moses.**

**(38) The Gershonites who were recorded by the clans of their ancestral house,**

**(39) from the age of thirty years up to the age of fifty, all who were subject to service for work relating to the Tent of Meeting –**

**(40) those recorded by the clans of their ancestral house came to 2,630.**

**(41) That was the enrollment of the Gershonite clans, all those performing duties relating to the Tent of Meeting whom Moses and Aaron recorded at the command of the Lord.**

**(42) The enrollment of the Merarite clans by the clans of their ancestral house,**

**(43) from the age of thirty years up to the age of fifty, all who were subject to service for work relating to the Tent of Meeting –**

**(44) those recorded by their clans came to 3,200.**

**(45) That was the enrollment of the Merarite clans which Moses and Aaron recorded at the command of the Lord through Moses.**

**(46) All the Levites whom Moses, Aaron, and the chieftains of Israel recorded by the clans of their ancestral houses,**

**(47) from the age of thirty years up to the age of fifty, all who were subject to duties of service and portorage relating to the Tent of Meeting –**

**(48) those recorded came to 8,580.**

**(49) Each one was given responsibility for his service and portorage at the command of the Lord through Moses, and each was recorded as the Lord had commanded Moses.**

**(49) Each one was given responsibility for his service:** Each Levite was assigned a permanent place in the service of the Tabernacle. Later, in the Temple in Jerusalem, the function of each of Aaron's descendants passed to their respective families through inheritance.

**(47) All who were subject to duties of service:** The Hebrew translates very literally as "All who come to serve the service of service and the service of portage."

The unusual wording *avodat avodah*, "the service of service," is understood to mean service that enables other service to take place. In contemporary terms we would say it is "back office" work performed in support of the priestly activities. According to the Midrash, this refers to the music that was an integral part of the Temple service. For many thousands of Levites, music was the primary form of service performed.

The Midrash further emphasizes that the music performed in the Temple was more than just a background activity. Music is essential to proper development of the soul, for prophecy, and for coming near to God. We see this, for example, in the incident of "Saul among the disciples of the prophets" (1 Sam. 10:5): "There, as you enter the town, you will encounter a band of prophets coming down from the shrine, preceded by lyres, timbrels, flutes, and harps, and they will be speaking in ecstasy"; in the story of David playing the lyre in order to dispel the "evil spirit" that had come over Saul (1 Sam. 16:16), in the words "Now then, get me a musician." As the musician played, the hand of the Lord came upon him" (i.e., the spirit of prophecy, 2 Kings 3:15); and in many other biblical passages.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The Gaon of Vilna said that if time had permitted, he would have devoted all his energies to studying only music; that music is the language of the soul; that it can be used to kill a person by taking his soul, but it can be used to resurrect the dead as well. (The Midrash believes that the cause of the death of Sennacherib's army was their having heard the angels singing. See 2 Kings 19:35.) The spiritual level of a society depends on the level of its musical culture. According to the complexity of the music that a nation or a society consumes, so does it develop and advance.

## § 5. COMING CLOSER TO HOLINESS, AND ALIENATION FROM HOLINESS

### § 5.1. SOLVING PROBLEMS THROUGH ALIENATION FROM HOLINESS AND BY COMING CLOSER TO HOLINESS

This book of Numbers recounts the nation's journey through the wilderness. A journey is a time when the routine, normal way of life is often broken. Weekly portion *Naso*, the first of the "portion of crises," is associated with personality crises – finding solutions to atypical problems that individuals experience. The Torah tells us that there are two ways that a person can find correction in such situations: by coming closer to holiness, or by moving further away from it.

The Torah cites three examples of how a person's correction can be affected by bringing him nearer to holiness: a person repenting from the sin of committing deceit, the *sotah*, "a wife suspected of infidelity," and the nazirite.

To illustrate the idea of correcting an individual by distancing him from holiness, the Torah cites three examples of persons who must be temporarily removed from the Israelite camp. These are the ritually unclean (by reason of defilement by a corpse), persons suffering a flux of bodily fluids, and lepers.

In all these situations, the person's relationship to the aspect of holiness must be adjusted. But whether he needs to be moved closer to holiness or further away from holiness depends on the specific correction that the Torah prescribes in each case. Either way, the individual's relationship to holiness is the axis around which he moves. And since

holiness is territorially concentrated in the Temple, he or she must be either brought closer to the Temple, or distanced further from it.

After the Torah has described the arrangement of the tribes' encampments around the Tabernacle (see § 2.6 above) – the “inner circle” (the Levites) and the “outer circle” (the twelve tribes) – the physical structure of the national organism is now revealed, at the center of which is Revelation, holiness.

While this focus on holiness is immensely important, it can also be a source of problems. There are cases when excessive proximity to holiness complicates a person's life because it does not allow him to be himself. (And in fact, as noted above – see § 3.5 – the periodic concealment of holiness is, for that very reason, one of the most important features of its operation.) The outward manifestation of this kind of problem is ritual impurity, and the correction of a person so affected is to move away from Holiness.

*Tzara'at* (a skin condition commonly but incorrectly translated as “leprosy”; see below Num. 5:2) is the highest degree of impurity. According to the Torah (see Num. 12:1,10,14; Deut. 24:8-9), and as greatly amplified in the Oral Tradition, this disease is a consequence of the sin of *leshon hara'*, “speaking evil” of one's fellow human being, or, more generally, immoral behavior in one's relationship with his neighbor. A person afflicted with *tzara'at* must remove himself beyond the boundaries of all three camps. There, alienated from society, he can renew contact with his true inner essence and correct himself, thus becoming pure once again.

The impurity of a person suffering from flux is a lesser grade of impurity than the leper's because it is not a direct result of his actions, although it is the indirect consequence of his having neglected personal hygiene with respect to his physical – and also spiritual – health. Such a person is removed from the Levite camp, because he cannot meet the purity requirements of that camp, as they apply to persons who wish to reside or enter there.<sup>20</sup>

The third type of impurity arises from coming in contact with the dead. It is not an indication of a person's defective morality or behavior; rather, it highlights the imperfection of this world, in which death exists

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<sup>20</sup> See details below, § 8.2.

as the result of the sin of Adam and Eve. A person defiled by contact with the dead is allowed to remain in the Israelite and Levite camps, and is excluded only from the territory of the Temple, because the Temple represents eternity, in which there is no death.

After describing those three situations where a person is required to distance himself from holiness, the Torah goes on to speak of three cases of the opposite situation, where being out of touch with holiness is in fact the source of a person's difficulties.

The first example of the three, is a person who has become estranged from holiness to such a degree that he has been negligent with respect to his neighbor's property and has misappropriated some part of it to himself. This is somewhat reminiscent of the leper mentioned just above, who spoke ill of his neighbor. But unlike the leper, here the individual resolves to repent and to correct the situation on his own, of his own free will and with no pressure from external circumstances. That is, there is no evidence against him in court, nor is he experiencing any outward physical symptoms, as in the case of the disease of *tzara'at*, brought on by the sin of scandalous speech.

A person who finds himself in this situation must draw closer to holiness, by coming to the Temple and offering a sacrifice to atone for his sin of duplicity, of misappropriating another's property. By drawing near to the Temple, he is brought to the realization that inflicting material harm on one's neighbor is likewise a serious detriment to holiness.

The second situation requiring a person to come near to the Temple involves a husband and wife who are troubled and perplexed in their relationship, each blaming the other for causing the conflict. This is similar to the case of the person suffering from flux, which came upon him as the result of his negligence, in allowing his surrounding space to become contaminated. Peace in the family must be built on a foundation of awareness of the Divine Presence between the spouses; when that foundation is lacking, their marital relationship is easily destroyed. The spouses must therefore be brought to the Temple, where they see that even the Divine Name can be erased<sup>21</sup> on their account – an extreme measure undertaken with the sole purpose of restoring peace in their home.

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<sup>21</sup> See below, § 5.4.

Finally, the last of the three situations that require drawing near to the Temple involves the nazirite – an individual who takes upon himself a vow of social separation and other specific restrictions, through which he is raised to a level like that of the High Priest, where there is no place for ritual impurity or death.

These two opposite sets of three situations show us the way for correcting the souls of private citizens. But they concern individuals, and if we concentrate only on those persons, we risk losing the national perspective. Therefore, immediately after them the Torah will speak of the blessing of Israel by the priests, which unites the entire Jewish nation under a plea for the Divine Presence to descend upon the community as a whole.

As important as it is to begin our work of correcting the specific problems of individuals, we must not lose sight that the full correction of private affairs can happen only when done within the context of correcting the larger community.

## § 5.2. REMOVING RITUALLY UNCLEAN PERSONS FROM THE CAMP (5:1-4)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב צוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ מִן־הַמַּחֲנֶה כֹּל־צָרוּעַ וְכֹל־זָב וְכֹל טִמְאָה לְגִפְשׁוֹ: ג מִזְכָּר עַד־נְקֵבָה תִּשְׁלְחוּ אֶל־מַחֲוֵץ לַמַּחֲנֶה תִּשְׁלְחוּם וְלֹא יִטְמְאוּ אֶת־מַחֲנֵיָהֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי שֹׁכֵן בְּתוֹכָם: ד וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אוֹתָם אֶל־מַחֲוֵץ לַמַּחֲנֶה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יי אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה כִּן עָשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

- (1) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**
- (2) **Instruct the Israelites to remove from camp anyone with an eruption or a discharge and anyone defiled by a corpse.**
- (3) **Remove male and female alike; put them outside the camp so that they do not defile the camp of those in whose midst I dwell.**
- (4) **The Israelites did so, putting them outside the camp; as the Lord had spoken to Moses, so the Israelites did.**

**(2) Instruct the Israelites to remove from camp:** After the structure of the camp has been described in detail in the opening chapters of this book of Numbers, laws are now given to preserve its purity.

**To remove from camp anyone with an eruption or a discharge and anyone defiled by a corpse:** These are the three categories of ritual impurity for whose correction a person can be expelled from the camp. That correction takes the form of distancing the unclean individual from holiness, because holiness cannot in and of itself improve a person – rather, such correction depends on the nature of the encounter. A meeting with holiness when a person is in a state of impurity can do him actual harm, rather than helping him.

**(2-3) To remove from camp ... put them outside the camp so that they do not defile the camp:** The word “camp” appears in these verses three times. Tradition understands this repetition as signifying “three levels of camp.”

The first level is the “camp of holiness” – the territory of the Temple as managed by Aaron and his sons.

The second level is the “camp of purity,” where the Levites are located.

And the third level is the “camp of Israel,” where all the other tribes reside.

The degree of a person’s “removal” from the camp depends on the type of impurity he or she is experiencing. Lepers must not remain even in the camp of Israel; they are expelled beyond the limits of all three camps. Persons suffering a flux are removed from the camp of holiness and the camp of purity (that is, the camps of the *kohanim* and the Levites), but they may remain in the camp of Israel. And those who have been defiled by coming in contact with the dead (the least stringent form of impurity) are allowed even in the camp of the Levites, but not in the camp of holiness.

Later, when the Jewish nation is settled in the Land of Israel, the Temple edifice and its courtyard will correspond to the camp of holiness, the Temple Mount to the camp of the Levites, i.e., the camp of purity, and urban residential zones (whether of Jerusalem or other cities surrounded by a wall) equate to the level of the camp of Israel.

**(2) Anyone with an eruption:** This disease, known as *tzara'at* in the Torah, is often translated as “leprosy,” but it does not actually correspond to leprosy in any modern sense, for the two conditions have entirely different symptoms. The translation given here (“anyone with an eruption”) avoids this problem.

**To remove from camp anyone with an eruption:** This person’s disease has made his guilt manifest to all, namely, he has perverted the God-given gift of speech, thereby harming his fellow human. Thus, his connection with society is an unhealthy one, and the remedy is to alienate him, to move him beyond the framework of society, where he can begin to understand the essence of his problem and undertake to improve himself. When the disease passes and he becomes pure again, he will be allowed to return to the camp.

Or a discharge: This is a painful, purulent discharge from the genital organs, a condition that materially compromises one’s health. It is assumed that he brought this on himself because of his negligent attitude to his own well-being. Although we cannot say that he is directly at fault, there is certainly a certain dereliction of duty. A person guilty of such negligence is not entirely expelled from society, but neither can he relate normally to purity or holiness. He is therefore expelled from the two inner camps, and allowed to remain only in the outermost one – on the periphery.

**And anyone defiled by a corpse:** The third level of impurity is that caused by coming in contact with a corpse. This impurity is short-term – it is removed when the affected person immerses in a *mikveh* (and is sprinkled with the ashes of the Red Heifer; see Num. 19:1-19 ff.). A person who has been so defiled has done nothing wrong. Should we hold him personally responsible for bringing death into the world, which in fact happened about only as the result of Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden?

Such a person may therefore remain even in the camp of the Levites. He is forbidden only to enter the camp of holiness, the Temple courtyard, for death has no place in the Temple.

**So that they do not defile the camp of those in whose midst I dwell:** All these strictures are imposed both for the benefit of the nation and for the benefit of the impure persons themselves.

**(4) The Israelites did so, putting them outside the camp:** Here we see at work the concept of “reducing one’s level” in order to make correction possible. It is a fundamental principle of life.

For example, in order to create Eve, God had first to put Adam to sleep (Gen. 2:21), because it would have been impossible in Adam’s normal, waking state to surgically remove an integral part of his anatomy and to reconstruct his body.

As another example, in order to repair a leaky vessel, we must first empty it entirely of any water it might still contain. Only after we plug and seal the holes is it once again fit to hold water.

And so it is with man. If he is spiritually defective, then no amount of holiness, or increased hours of Torah study, can help him. He must first be estranged from holiness, so that in that state of relative alienation, he can refine his character, and only then can he come closer to holiness once again.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook applies this same idea to the level of religiosity of the Jewish people in the twentieth century. He explains that for the correct restructuring of the Jewish nation, they had to move away at some stage from holiness. And this, says Rabbi Kook, is the underlying reason for the Zionist movement’s departure from religion in the early days of the State of Israel.

The people who had grown up in *galut*, “exile,” understood holiness only in its *galut* form – Torah study and observance of the commandments; its “vessels” (i.e. the people’s souls shaped by the exilic experience) were therefore unsuited to contain a more advanced level of Divine light. To enable the people to perceive the Divine light of the Land of Israel, which is of a Messianic character, it was first necessary to break down and reconstruct the “vessels” – a temporary move away from holiness. That temporary departure from holiness, which was necessary for achieving national independence, is the notorious *chutzpah*, the brash impudence of the pioneers, for which the Zionist movement was famous in the earliest stages of its development.

### § 5.3. CORRECTION FOR UNLAWFUL APPROPRIATION OF PROPERTY (5:5-10)

הַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: וַדַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אֶיֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר כִּי יַעֲשֶׂה מִכֹּל־חַטָּאת הָאֵלֶּם לְמַעַל מֵעַל בֵּין וְאֲשֶׁמָּה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא: וְהִתְוֹדוּ אֶת־חַטָּאתְכֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתֶם וְהִשִּׁיב אֶת־אֲשָׁמוֹ בְּרֹאשׁוֹ וְחָמִישְׁתּוֹ יִסֹּף עָלָיו וְנָתַן לְאִשְׁרֵי אֲשֶׁם לוֹ: הַוְאִם־אֵין לְאִישׁ גֹּאֵל לְהִשִּׁיב הָאֲשָׁם אֵלָיו הָאֲשָׁם הַמּוֹשֵׁב לִי לִפְהֶן מִלְבָּד אֵיל הַכִּפְּרִים אֲשֶׁר יִכְפְּרֶבּוּ עָלָיו: ט וְכָל־תְּרוּמָה לְכָל־קִדְשֵׁי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־יִקְרִיבוּ לִפְהֶן לוֹ יִהְיֶה: י וְאִישׁ אֶת־קִדְשָׁיו לוֹ יִהְיֶה אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־יִתֵּן לִפְהֶן לוֹ יִהְיֶה:

(5) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**

(6) **Speak to the Israelites: When a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow man, thus breaking faith with the Lord, and that person realizes his guilt,**

(7) **he shall confess the wrong that he has done. He shall make restitution in the principal amount and add one-fifth to it, giving it to him whom he has wronged.**

(8) **If the man has no kinsman to whom restitution can be made, the amount repaid shall go to the Lord for the priest – in addition to the ram of expiation with which expiation is made on his behalf.**

(9) **So, too, any gift among the sacred donations that the Israelites offer shall be the priest's.**

(10) **And each shall retain his sacred donations: each priest shall keep what is given to him.**

This passage stands in contrast to the previous one, where the correction consisted in removing the affected party from holiness. Here, in the case of misappropriation of another's property, the solution lies in drawing closer to the source of holiness.

**(7) He shall make restitution in the principal amount:** When the crime involves material property – the misappropriation of a person's possessions by another – the guilty party must confess to his wrongdoing

and restore the property in question (or the value thereof), plus a certain amount in addition, to the individual he has wronged. Finally, he must offer a sacrifice for atonement.

**And add one-fifth to it:** That is, he must add a quarter of the original value to it, such that the added amount will then be one fifth of the total that is returned. But actually, as we have noted earlier (Exod. 21:37, 22:3) the material compensation in the case of actual theft is much more stringent – the thief must pay twice the value of the article he stole, or for certain types of theft even several times that amount.

However, the case under consideration here involves property that came into the hands of the perpetrator lawfully. For example, he is a bailee who received an article for storage, and later claims that the article has been lost or stolen. Or he was obliged to pay and hasn't paid. Or he was otherwise negligent with respect to the other party's property.

**(6) When a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow man, thus breaking faith with the Lord:** The literal translation is somewhat different: "When a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow man, and *breaks faith with the Lord.*" Thus, we can interpret this verse in two ways.

(i) The Torah here speaks of two distinct actions: first a sin against a person, which then leads to a second sinful act, a betrayal of the Lord in the form of a false oath. That is, he misappropriated the property of another, and then swore falsely about it.

(ii) There was only one act, a sin against man. But such an act is itself also a betrayal of God. Because any crime committed against one's fellow human being is also a crime against the Almighty.

The first of those two interpretations is also how the *halachah* understands this verse. But the main translation given here ("thus breaking faith with the Lord") accords with the second interpretation.

**And that person realizes his guilt:** That is, he experiences pangs of remorse and decides to right the wrong he has committed, although no court decision or outsider testimony has compelled him to do so.

The mode of restitution described in this passage applies only to such a situation.

**(8) If the man has no kinsman to whom restitution can be made, the amount repaid shall go to the Lord:** Returning the misappropriated property is important not only in order to restore the aggrieved party to his former position, but also for effecting repentance and atonement for the perpetrator.

**In addition to the ram of expiation with which expiation is made on his behalf:** The sinner, sensing his guilt, has decided to reform, but he needs to be moved further in that direction, in order to come closer to holiness. He has confessed to having sinned against his fellow human, but he as yet fails to understand that he has sinned also against God. Such a person is therefore obligated to bring a ram of expiation to the Temple, which helps him establish contact with holiness.

**The amount repaid shall go to the Lord for the priest:** The *kohanim* are entitled to use part of what is dedicated to the Almighty for their own purposes.

**(10) And each shall retain his sacred donations:** These verses are added here based on the “associative principle” of how the Torah organizes its topics. Since offerings brought by a penitent to the Temple were being discussed, other donations to the priests are now also mentioned.

**(10) And each shall retain his sacred donations:** each priest shall keep what is given to him: A person who brings a sacrifice or a donation to the Temple (this includes also the tithes given to the Levites) has the right to choose the *kohen* (or Levite) to whom he wants to transfer his offering, and the other *kohanim* have no right to object to his choice.

The *kohanim* and the Levites were not merely servants of the Temple. In the Land of Israel, they were divided into a rotating schedule of twenty-four annual *mishmarot*, “watches,” such that each of them served in the Temple for only two weeks out of each year. The rest of the time they lived among the other tribes – the *kohanim* mostly near the Temple, the Levites throughout the Land of Israel. Their responsibilities at those times were to preserve religious tradition, instruct the people, educate the children, and other similar activities.

Every Jew was required to donate a portion of his produce to the *kohanim* and the Levites as *terumah*, “heave-offerings,” and *ma’aser*, “tithes,” respectively. But it was always the prerogative of each citizen

to choose the *kohen* and the Levite to whom he wanted to give those donations. Of course, he would normally choose someone closely aligned with him spiritually and psychologically, who served his family ably in the capacity of religious teacher and mentor – in other words, a person who executed his duties responsibly and admirably. Thus, a kind of “popular reciprocity” arose, wherein the most conscientious *kohanim* and Levites received the greatest portion of donations. This created competition among the Levites and among the *kohanim*, the overall effect of which was to positively impact the quality of their work.

The Tradition further states that the Levites and the *kohanim* also ran a small philanthropic organization for distribution of funds, so that the least fortunate among their brethren would not be left destitute. Those in need would receive something like what today we would call “union benefits.”

#### § 5.4. SOTAH: THE ORDEAL OF A WOMAN SUSPECTED OF INFIDELITY (5:11 31)

יא וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: יב דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם  
 אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי־תִשְׁטָה אִשְׁתּוֹ וּמַעַלָּה בּוֹ מַעַל: יג וְשָׁכַב אִישׁ אֶת־הָ  
 שִׁכְבַּת־זָרַע וְנִעְלַם מֵעֵינַי אִישָׁה וְנִסְתָּרָה וְהִיא נִטְמָאָה וְעַד אִין  
 בָּהּ וְהוּא לֹא נִתְפָּשָׁה: יד וְעָבַר עָלָיו רֹחַ־קִנְיָאָה וְקָנְאָה אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ  
 וְהוּא נִטְמָאָה אוֹ־עָבַר עָלָיו רֹחַ־קִנְיָאָה וְקָנְאָה אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהִיא לֹא  
 נִטְמָאָה: טו וְהִבִּיא הָאִישׁ אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן וְהִבִּיא אֶת־קַרְבָּנָהּ  
 עָלֶיהָ עֲשִׂירֵת הָאֵיפָה קֶמַח שְׁעָרִים לֹא־יִצָּק עָלָיו שֶׁמֶן וְלֹא־יִתֵּן עָלָיו  
 לְבַנָּה כִּי־מִנְחַת קִנְיָאָה הוּא מִנְחַת זָכָרוֹן מִזְבֵּחַת עֹזֶן: טז וְהִקְרִיב  
 אֶתֶּה הַכֹּהֵן וְהָעֹמֶדָה לִפְנֵי יי: יז וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן מִיָּם קֹדָשִׁים בְּכֹל־  
 תָּרֶשׁ וּמִן־הָעֶפֶר אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בְּקַרְקַע הַמִּשְׁכָּן יִקַּח הַכֹּהֵן וְנָתַן אֶל־  
 הַמִּים: יח וְהָעֹמֶד לַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה לִפְנֵי יי וּפָרַע אֶת־רֹאשׁ הָאִשָּׁה  
 וְנָתַן עַל־כַּפֶּיהָ אֶת מִנְחַת הַזָּכָרוֹן מִנְחַת קִנְיָאָה הוּא וּבָגַד הַכֹּהֵן יִהְיֶה מִי  
 הַמָּרִים הַמְאָרְרִים: יט וְהִשְׁבִּיעַ אֶתֶּה הַכֹּהֵן וְאָמַר אֶל־הָאִשָּׁה אִם־לֹא  
 שָׁכַב אִישׁ אִתְּךָ וְאִם־לֹא שָׁטִית טְמָאָה תַּחַת אִישׁ הַנִּקְּי מִמִּי הַמָּרִים  
 הַמְאָרְרִים הָאֵלֶּה: כ וְאֵת כִּי שָׁטִית תַּחַת אִישׁ וְכִי נִטְמָאת וְיִתֵּן

אִישׁ בָּדַד אֶת־שִׁכְבֹּתוֹ מִבְּלַעַד־י אִישׁוֹ: כֹּה וְהִשְׁבִּיעַ הִכְהֵן אֶת־הָאֱשֶׁה בְּשִׁבְעַת הָאֱלֹהִים וְאָמַר הִכְהֵן לְאִשָּׁה יְתֵנוּ יי אֹתָךְ לְאֱלֹהִים וְלִשְׁבֻעָה בְּתוֹךְ עַמֶּךָ בְּתַת יי אֶת־יְרִכְךָ נִפְלֹת וְאֶת־בִּטְנְךָ צָבָה: כִּבּוּבָאוּ הַמַּיִם הַמְּאָרְרִים הָאֱלֹהִים בְּמַעֲיָד לְצַבּוֹת בֶּטֶן וְלִנְפֹל יָרֵךְ וְאָמְרָה הָאֱשֶׁה אֲמֹן | אֲמֹן: כִּי וְכִתַּב אֶת־הָאֱלֹת הָאֱלֹהִים הִכְהֵן בִּסְפָר וּמַחָה אֶל־מֵי הַמָּרִים: כִּד וְהִשְׁקָה אֶת־הָאֱשֶׁה אֶת־מֵי הַמָּרִים הַמְּאָרְרִים וּבָאוּ בָּהּ הַמַּיִם הַמְּאָרְרִים לְמָרִים: כֶּה וְלָקַח הִכְהֵן מִיַּד הָאֱשֶׁה אֶת מִנְחַת הַקִּנְאָה וְהִגִּיף אֶת־הַמִּנְחָה לִפְנֵי יי וְהִקְרִיב אֹתָהּ אֶל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ: כֹּו וְקִמַּץ הִכְהֵן מִן־הַמִּנְחָה אֶת־אֲזִכְרֹתָהּ וְהִקְטִיר הַמִּזְבֵּחַהּ וְאַחַר יִשְׁקָה אֶת־הָאֱשֶׁה אֶת־הַמַּיִם: כֹּז וְהִשְׁקָה אֶת־הַמַּיִם וְהִיְתָה אִם־נִטְמָאָה וְתִמְעַל מֵעַל בְּאִשָּׁה וּבָאוּ בָּהּ הַמַּיִם הַמְּאָרְרִים לְמָרִים וְצָבְתָהּ בִּטְנָהּ וְנִפְלָה יְרִכָּהּ וְהִיְתָה הָאֱשֶׁה לְאֱלֹהִים בְּקָרֵב עִמָּה: כֶּח וְאִם־לֹא נִטְמָאָה הָאֱשֶׁה וְטָהֳרָה הִיא וְנִקְתָּה וְנִזְרְעָה זֶרַע: כֶּט זֹאת תֹּוֹרַת הַקִּנְאָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁטָה אִשָּׁה תַּחַת אִשָּׁה וְנִטְמָאָה: לֹא אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲבֹר עָלָיו רֹיחַ קִנְאָה וְקִנְאָה אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהִעֲמִיד אֶת־הָאֱשֶׁה לִפְנֵי יי וַעֲשֵׂה לָּהּ הִכְהֵן אֶת כָּל־הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת: לֹא וְנִקְהָה הָאִישׁ מֵעֵזֶן וְהָאֱשֶׁה הִיא תִּשָּׂא אֶת־עֲוֹנָהּ:

(11) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**

(12) **Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: If any man's wife has gone astray and broken faith with him**

(13) **in that a man has had carnal relations with her unbeknown to her husband, and she keeps secret the fact that she has defiled herself without being forced, and there is no witness against her –**

(14) **but a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about the wife who has defiled herself; or if a fit of jealousy comes over one and he is wrought up about his wife although she has not defiled herself –**

(15) **the man shall bring his wife to the priest. And he shall bring as an offering for her one-tenth of an ephah of barley flour. No oil shall be poured upon it and no frankincense shall be laid on it, for it is a meal offering of jealousy, a meal offering of remembrance which recalls wrongdoing.**

**(16) The priest shall bring her forward and have her stand before the Lord.**

**(17) The priest shall take sacral water in an earthen vessel and, taking some of the earth that is on the floor of the Tabernacle, the priest shall put it into the water.**

**(18) After he has made the woman stand before the Lord, the priest shall bare the woman's head and place upon her hands the meal offering of remembrance, which is a meal offering of jealousy. And in the priest's hands shall be the water of bitterness that induces the spell.**

**(19) The priest shall adjure the woman, saying to her, "If no man has lain with you, if you have not gone astray in defilement while married to your husband, be immune to harm from this water of bitterness that induces the spell.**

**(20) But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and have defiled yourself, if a man other than your husband has had carnal relations with you" –**

**(21) here the priest shall administer the curse of adjuration to the woman, as the priest goes on to say to the woman – "may the Lord make you a curse and an imprecation among your people, as the Lord causes your thigh to sag and your belly to distend;**

**(22) may this water that induces the spell enter your body, causing the belly to distend and the thigh to sag." And the woman shall say, "Amen, amen!"**

**(23) The priest shall put these curses down in writing and rub it off into the water of bitterness.**

**(24) He is to make the woman drink the water of bitterness that induces the spell, so that the spell-inducing water may enter into her to bring on bitterness.**

**(25) Then the priest shall take from the woman's hand the meal offering of jealousy, elevate the meal offering before the Lord, and present it on the altar.**

(26) **The priest shall scoop out of the meal offering a token part of it and turn it into smoke on the altar. Last, he shall make the woman drink the water.**

(27) **Once he has made her drink the water – if she has defiled herself by breaking faith with her husband, the spell-inducing water shall enter into her to bring on bitterness, so that her belly shall distend and her thigh shall sag; and the woman shall become a curse among her people.**

(28) **But if the woman has not defiled herself and is pure, she shall be unharmed and able to retain seed.**

(29) **This is the ritual in cases of jealousy, when a woman goes astray while married to her husband and defiles herself,**

(30) **or when a fit of jealousy comes over a man and he is wrought up over his wife: the woman shall be made to stand before the Lord and the priest shall carry out all this ritual with her.**

(31) **The man shall be clear of guilt; but that woman shall suffer for her guilt.**

The family is the very foundation of society. Therefore, the correction of a functioning of society must begin with ways of restoring family trust.

**(12) If any man’s wife has gone astray and broken faith with him:** The verb, *S-T-H*, “to go astray” – whence “*sotah*,” the wife who is unfaithful, or has merely brought suspicion of that upon herself – means “to turn away from the proper path.” That is, this woman has veered from the honorable path, thus arousing her husband’s suspicion, such that his jealousy is not unreasonable or unfounded. Because we read in Num. 5:13, “she keeps secret the fact that she has defiled herself,” the halachah understands the situation as follows.

The man’s wife has gone into seclusion with another man, after her husband importuned her not to do so. But she paid no heed and proceeded to act against her husband’s wishes and admonitions. Thus, the husband’s jealousy has been aroused by his wife’s indiscreet behavior and her violation of his explicit exhortations. At very least, the woman is guilty of gross disrespect and frivolity.

**(13) Without being forced:** If an actual rape was committed, then the woman cannot be held accountable.

**(14) But a fit of jealousy comes over him:** This is the secondary reason, or perhaps even the primary reason, that the *sotah* procedure must be performed. The test aims to assuage the husband's jealousy, which can easily lead to destruction of the family. Thus, both the woman and her husband are to blame for this family crisis. She acted frivolously, disregarding her husband's entreaties. And he allowed himself to be overcome by jealousy, from which he now cannot backtrack.

And he is wrought up about the wife: The full verse reads, "But a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about the wife who has defiled herself; or if a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about his wife although she has not defiled herself."

We know that the Torah is always sparing with its words, and would not repeat a passage gratuitously.

Thus, the repetition of the words "a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about his wife" may be understood as in some sense indicating that this was not the first time she had committed such an impropriety, and that he had actively warned her after that first incident never to repeat it, but she disregarded those admonitions. And so it came to this.

(Hence the halachic requirement that in order for the *sotah* procedure to be performed the husband must have actively warned his wife not to seclude herself with the other man, for it is reasonable to assume that he actually did so after the first occurrence. The word *ve kinne* is thus taken to mean "and he warned," notwithstanding that the word *ve kinne*, strictly speaking, only indicates feeling an emotion of jealousy, rather than acting on that jealousy by issuing a warning or other such.)

**(15) The man shall bring his wife to the priest:** The man has the right to simply divorce his wife – no one obligates him to bring his wife to the Temple to verify her fidelity. And of course, it must be extremely unpleasant for him to declare publicly that his wife has disobeyed his warnings to keep away from another man.

The wife too has the right to avoid this humiliating procedure and to opt for divorce instead.

Thus, if the couple has decided to come to the Temple for a resolution, it means that neither of them wants a divorce; they both want to preserve the marriage, but they have gone so far in their conflict that they cannot break the impasse on their own. They need help.

The essence of the correction of their relationship here is precisely in their coming to the Temple. When a husband and wife are in conflict, most likely they have moved away from holiness. Once the sense of the Divine presence disappears from their relationship, they concentrate on trifles and jealousy, and quarrels begin. Their correction lies in returning to holiness, and they must therefore be brought to the Temple in order to restore the feeling of the Divine presence in their lives.

There in the Temple they participate in a powerful series of events that is designed to sober them up and return them to reality, so to speak. Although only the woman is tested, since it is she, halachically speaking, who is guilty of immorality or frivolity, the *sotah* procedure is for both of them an unnerving psychological drama. This inordinate stress helps them find closure for the entire situation and restore a normal family life. The conflict of mutual misunderstanding is resolved by bringing the couple closer to holiness, instead of the alienation from it that they had been experiencing.

**(15) And he shall bring as an offering for her one-tenth of an ephah of barley flour:** Meal offerings in the Torah are usually made from wheat flour, but here from barley, a grain used primarily as animal fodder. The Mishnah (*Sotah* 2:1) explains that this is meant to highlight that the entire incident is the result of concession to animal instincts.

**No oil shall be poured upon it and no frankincense shall be laid on it:** Olive oil and frankincense were standard accompaniments for meal offerings (Lev. 2:1). But not here.

Olive oil, widely used in ancient times for kindling lamps, was a symbol of enlightenment. But this situation of the *sotah*, on the contrary, is a “dark episode.” And frankincense, which imparted a sweet smell to the offerings, is deliberately omitted in this situation, which is all in all a “foul-smelling” affair.

The common thread is that oil and fragrant resin are symbols of joy, and it is therefore inappropriate to use either one of them in this case.

**(16) The priest shall bring her forward and have her stand before the Lord:** Because the source of the problem was the woman's alienation from the Almighty, we effect her correction by bringing her closer to Him.

**(17) The priest shall take sacral water:** "Sacral water" means water taken from the copper laver that stood in the Temple courtyard. (The priests washed their hands and feet from this laver in order to sanctify themselves before performing their daily service in the Temple; see Exod. 30:18-21.)

Torah (Exod. 38:8) tells us that the laver was constructed from copper mirrors donated by women who performed tasks at the entrance to the Tabernacle. The Midrash explains that the women had used these mirrors in Egypt to adorn themselves, in order to be attractive to their husbands and to increase the Jewish nation. Thus, sacral water taken from the laver is used here in the *sotah* procedure, because it is the water most appropriate for promoting properly channeled sexual urges.

**And, taking some of the earth that is on the floor of the Tabernacle, the priest shall put it into the water:** Soon, as part of this *sotah* procedure, the woman will drink this potion, but with a text written by the priest further rubbed off into the mixture (Num. 5:23). It is a rather unusual brew – water never otherwise used for drinking mixed with sacral earth and the erased letters of a text that includes God's holy name. All these details are designed to stun the participants, to propel them from their normal condition into a state of confusion.

And, taking some of the earth that is on the floor of the Tabernacle: Much later, when the permanent Temple was built in Jerusalem, one of the stone slabs with which the Temple courtyard was paved was deliberately left loose and unsecured, and fitted with a special hook, to be used as a handle. The intent was to allow that slab to be raised in order to take from beneath it a clod of "the earth that is on the floor of the Tabernacle," if and when needed for performing the *sotah* procedure.

**(18) The priest shall bare the woman's head:** He loosens her headdress, removes it, and dishevels her hair. As it is considered indecent for a married woman to appear in public with her hair loose, this is yet one more of a series of actions in the *sotah* procedure that are intended to be shocking and humiliating.

**And place upon her hands the meal offering of remembrance, which is a meal offering of jealousy:** All this is meant to give the woman serious pause as to whether she is prepared to take an oath before God declaring her fidelity to her husband. If at this moment she decides that she does not wish to undergo the *sotah* procedure, she can still refuse and opt instead for divorce.

**(19) The priest shall adjure the woman, saying to her, “If no man has lain with you, if you have not gone astray in defilement while married to your husband, be immune to harm:** The *kohen* begins from a presumption of innocence.

**(20) But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and have defiled yourself:** Only after expressing exculpatory assumptions does the *kohen* then speak of a possible betrayal.

**(21) As the Lord causes your thigh to sag and your belly to distend”:** These are the organs that participate in sexual intercourse. Thigh is a euphemism for the genital organs, and the womb is the organ of conception.

**And the woman shall say, “Amen, amen!”:** The “amen” twice spoken by the wife expresses her acceptance of the oath uttered by the priest. The purpose of this psychological duress was to urge the woman, if she was in fact guilty of infidelity, to refuse to undergo the test.

**(23) The priest shall put these curses down in writing and rub it off into the water of bitterness:** This is the third ingredient of the drink. The priest writes a text containing the Name of the Almighty. Erasing God’s name is normally strictly forbidden, but a unique exception is made for the *sotah*. For when the husband and wife see that the Almighty is prepared even to have His name erased in order to restore peace between them, they are imbued with the urgency of restoring the Divine presence to their relationship.

**(27) Once he has made her drink the water – if she has defiled herself ... the spell-inducing water shall enter into her to bring on bitterness, so that her belly shall distend ... and the woman shall become a curse among her people:** If she is guilty, a swift but agonizing death awaits her, revealing to all the crime that she committed in secret.

**(28) But if the woman has not defiled herself and is pure, she shall be unharmed and able to retain seed:** If the woman is innocent,

Heaven bestows on her yet another blessing: if she was barren before, she will now conceive and give birth. By drawing near to holiness, besides clearing herself of baseless charges she also merits to rebuild her relationship with her husband and augment their family.

**(31) The man shall be clear of guilt:** Because the woman is in fact innocent, her husband is now cleared of the sin of suspecting an innocent person of a serious offense.

### § 5.5. THE VOW OF THE NAZIRITE (6:1-21)

א וידבר יי אל־משה לאמר: ב דבר אל־בני ישראל ואמרת אליהם איש או־אשה כי יפלא לנדל גדר נזיר להזיר ליי: ג מין ושכר וזיר חמץ יין וחמץ שכר לא ישטה וכל־משרת ענבים לא ישטה וענבים לחים ויבשים לא יאכל: ד כל ימי נזרו מכל אשר יעשה מגפן הזין מחרצנים ועד־זג לא יאכל: ה כל־ימי גדר נזרו תער לא־יעבר על־ראשו עד־מלאת הימים אשר־יזיר ליי קדש יהיה גדל פרע שער ראשו: ו כל־ימי הזירו ליי על־גפוש מת לא יבא: ז ולאביו ולאמו לאחיו ולאחיתו לא־יטמא להם במתם כי נזר אלהיו על־ראשו: ח כל ימי נזרו קדש הוא ליי: ט וכי־ימות מת עליו בפתע פתאם וטמא ראש נזרו וגלח ראשו ביום טהרתו ביום השביעי יגלחנו: י וביום השמיני יבא שתי תרים או שני בני יונה אל־הכהן אל־פתח אהל מועד: יא ועשה הכהן אחד לחטאת ואחד לעלה וכפר עליו מאשר חטא על־הגפוש וקדש את־ראשו ביום ההוא: יב והזיר ליי את־ימי נזרו והביא כבש בן־שנתו לאשם והימים הראשונים יפלו כי טמא נזרו: יג וזאת תורת הנזיר ביום מלאת ימי נזרו יביא אתו אל־פתח אהל מועד: יד והקריב את־קרבנו ליי כבש בן־שנתו תמים אחד לעלה וכבשה אחת בת־שנתה תמימה לחטאת ואיל־אחד תמים לשלמים: טו וסל מצות סלת חלת בלילת בשמן ורקיקי מצות משחים בשמן ומנחתם ונספיהם: טז והקריב הכהן לפני יי ועשה את־חטאתו ואת־עלתו: יז ואת־האיל יעשה זבח שלמים ליי על סל המצות ועשה הכהן את־מנחתו ואת־נסכו: יח וגלח הנזיר פתח אהל מועד את־ראש נזרו ולקח את־שער ראש נזרו ונתן על־האש אשר־תחת זבח השלמים: יט ולקח הכהן את־הזרע בשלה מן־האיל ויחלת מצה אחת

מִן־הַסֵּל וּרְקִיק מִצֶּה אָחַד וְנָתַן עַל־כַּפֵּי הַנָּזִיר אַחַר הַתְּגַלְתּוֹ אֶת־  
 נָזְרוֹ: כִּוְהִנִּיף אוֹתָם הַכֹּהֵן | תִּנְנוּפָה לִפְנֵי יי' קֹדֶשׁ הוּא לִכְהֵן עַל תְּזֵה  
 הַתְּנוּפָה וְעַל שׂוֹק הַתְּרוּמָה וְאַחֵר יִשְׁתֶּה הַנָּזִיר יי': כֹּא זֹאת תּוֹרַת  
 הַנָּזִיר אֲשֶׁר יֵדֵר קִרְבָּנוֹ לִי עַל־נָזְרוֹ מִלִּבָּד אֲשֶׁר־תִּשְׁיֵג יָדוֹ כְּפִי נִדְרוֹ  
 אֲשֶׁר יֵדֵר בְּן יַעֲשֶׂה עַל תּוֹרַת נָזְרוֹ:

General principles:

- (1) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**
- (2) **Speak to the Israelites and say to them: If anyone, man or woman, explicitly utters a nazirite's vow, to set himself apart for the Lord,**
- (3) **he shall abstain from wine and any other intoxicant; he shall not drink vinegar of wine or of any other intoxicant, neither shall he drink anything in which grapes have been steeped, nor eat grapes fresh or dried.**
- (4) **Throughout his term as nazirite, he may not eat anything that is obtained from the grapevine, even seeds or skin.**
- (5) **Throughout the term of his vow as nazirite, no razor shall touch his head; it shall remain consecrated until the completion of his term as nazirite of the Lord, the hair of his head being left to grow untrimmed.**
- (6) **Throughout the term that he has set apart for the Lord, he shall not go in where there is a dead person.**
- (7) **Even if his father or mother, or his brother or sister should die, he must not defile himself for them, since hair set apart for his God is upon his head:**
- (8) **throughout his term as nazirite he is consecrated to the Lord.**

If a person dies suddenly near him:

- (9) **If a person dies suddenly near him, defiling his consecrated hair, he shall shave his head on the day he becomes clean; he shall shave it on the seventh day.**
- (10) **On the eighth day he shall bring two turtledoves or two pigeons to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.**

**(11) The priest shall offer one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering, and make expiation on his behalf for the guilt that he incurred through the corpse. That same day he shall reconsecrate his head**

**(12) and rededicate to the Lord his term as nazirite; and he shall bring a lamb in its first year as a penalty offering. The previous period shall be void, since his consecrated hair was defiled.**

The procedure for concluding the period of nazirhood:

**(13) This is the ritual for the nazirite: On the day that his term as nazirite is completed, he shall be brought to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.**

**(14) As his offering to the Lord he shall present: one male lamb in its first year, without blemish, for a burnt offering; one ewe lamb in its first year, without blemish, for a sin offering; one ram without blemish for an offering of well-being;**

**(15) a basket of unleavened cakes of choice flour with oil mixed in, and unleavened wafers spread with oil; and the proper meal offerings and libations.**

**(16) The priest shall present them before the Lord and offer the sin offering and the burnt offering.**

**(17) He shall offer the ram as a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord, together with the basket of unleavened cakes; the priest shall also offer the meal offerings and the libations.**

**(18) The nazirite shall then shave his consecrated hair, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and take the locks of his consecrated hair and put them on the fire that is under the sacrifice of well-being.**

**(19) The priest shall take the shoulder of the ram when it has been boiled, one unleavened cake from the basket, and one unleavened wafer, and place them on the hands of the nazirite after he has shaved his consecrated hair.**

**(20) The priest shall elevate them as an elevation offering before the Lord; and this shall be a sacred donation for the**

**priest, in addition to the breast of the elevation offering and the thigh of gift offering. After that the nazirite may drink wine.**

**(21) Such is the obligation of a nazirite; except that he who vows an offering to the Lord of what he can afford, beyond his nazirite requirements, must do exactly according to the vow that he has made beyond his obligation as a nazirite.**

(2) **A nazirite's vow:** A nazirite (Hebrew *nazir*, from *N-Z-R*, “to separate oneself, abstain”) is a person who wishes to adopt and demonstrate to others a greater level of sanctity than is normally required. This decision is motivated by the person's overall sense that there is insufficient holiness in the life of the Jewish nation, and his desire to remedy that shortcoming. The Torah gives such a person the status of a “temporary High Priest in the Divine service,” and imposes restrictions on him corresponding to that status.

But a nazirite is by no means a hermit. He continues normal family life and retains his social connections, all the while correcting those around him, which he does, in a certain sense, by scandalizing society. His full head of hair makes the nazirite conspicuous; he is noticed everywhere he goes. Everyone knows him. His mere presence proclaims the lack of “normalized sanctity” in society and calls for its correction. In this regard, Amos (2:11) places the nazirite on par with a prophet.

We spoke earlier of effecting correction for people who have committed some wrongdoing, or who are ritually unclean; that is, correcting the negative aspects of society. But for promoting a healthy society this is not enough. We also need people who voluntarily embrace an increased level of purity and holiness – people who actively promote society's positive aspects.

The vow of nazirhood is not a generally recommended action; it is a path suitable for only a select few. But for society as a whole, it is nevertheless essential that there will always be people who undertake this vow.

**Nazir:** Various terms found in this chapter – “vow,” “nazirhood,” “dedicating oneself,” “abstaining from,” “crown” (as in “the crown of his God” and “his crown of hair,” alternate translations used in Num. 6:7, 19) –

all derive from the same verbal root, *N-Z-R*. That root denotes being singled out or keeping apart from the rest (Jud. 13:5, 7), abstaining from something (Lev. 22:2; Zech. 7:3), or leaving something untouched and without interference (e.g., with reference to grapevines that grow during the shemittah and Jubilee years without cultivation; see Lev. 25:5, 11). All these concepts find concrete expression in the nazirite.

**A nazirite's vow, to set himself apart for the Lord:** As the essence of nazirhood is to dedicate oneself to the Almighty, the specific restrictions by which the nazirite must abide merely follow as the natural consequence of that general principle.

**(3) He shall abstain from wine and any other intoxicant:** The *kohen*, while serving in the Temple, must refrain from wine and intoxicating beverages (Lev. 10:9). Likewise the nazirite, for he is, as it were, performing the Temple service of the Almighty.

**(4) He may not eat anything that is obtained from the grapevine, even seeds or skin:** This exceeds what is expected even from the priests, who are commanded: "Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die ... for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean" (Lev. 10:9).

A drunken priest is forbidden to perform the Temple service or execute any of his priestly duties, which includes teaching Torah to the people or rendering complex legal decisions ("for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean").

For the nazirite, however, not only is intoxication forbidden, but even eating any part or derivative of the grape, including even the seeds or the rind. This demonstrates that the point here is not only personal sobriety, but also a "declarative distancing" from anything associated with grapes in any way, for it is in this that the nazirite's moral influence on society consists. Grapes and wine are positive, even essential, things, but a person can easily become enslaved to them. The nazirite therefore loudly proclaims his total separation from them.

**(5) Throughout the term of his vow as nazirite, no razor shall touch his head; it shall remain consecrated ... the hair of his head being left to grow untrimmed:** This head of hair is called *nezer*

*elohav 'al rosho*, “the crown of his God upon his head” (Num. 6:7, literal translation). In this sense the nazirite’s hair is like the diadem on the head of the High Priest, which is also called *nezer* (Exod. 29:6).

More literally, the words *gaddel pera’*, “the hair of his head being left to grow untrimmed” (Num. 6:7) would be translated as “the hair of his head wildly let grown.” From this phrasing the Tradition concludes that the minimum term of nazirhood is thirty days, since hair growth of any shorter interval would not create the impression of something allowed to grow wild.

**(6) Throughout the term that he has set apart for the Lord, he shall not go in where there is a dead person:** Of the nazirite’s three prohibitions, this one is primary, because if it is violated the nazirite is considered defiled, and must begin anew the period of his vow (which is not the case for the other two prohibitions, drinking wine and haircutting).

**(7) Even if his father or mother, or his brother or sister should die, he must not defile himself for them:** This requirement is more stringent for the nazirite than even for a High Priest (whereas for an ordinary priest it does not apply at all, see Lev. 21:11, 21:2 ff.). In other words, the nazirite is deemed comparable to the High Priest doing the Divine service in God’s Temple.

The prohibition of coming in contact with a corpse emphasizes that the essence of the Temple – and of Divinity – is life. Death is only a consequence of humanity’s (temporary) distancing from God, and will ultimately be overcome.

The nazirite’s restrictions can also be interpreted in another way – as the expression of his desire to return to the primordial conditions of the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve transgressed.

If we follow this approach, the nazirite’s prohibition of consuming grapes is analogous to Adam and Eve’s prohibition of partaking from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. According to one opinion in the Talmud, that fruit was in fact the grape (Berachot 40a). And the nazirite’s prohibition of coming in contact with the dead emphasizes that there was no death before the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Finally, the haircutting prohibition symbolizes a desire to return to the pre-Edenic state of the world in which neither society nor its influence

existed (for it is only the influence of society that dictates the aesthetics represented by a haircut).

This does not mean that the development of civilization as a whole was a bad thing that should never have happened. Nazirhood is by no means the proper path for everyone, but there is a definite need to remind society of its original, “pre-civilized” state, because it too has its positive elements.

**(8) Throughout his term as nazirite he is consecrated to the Lord:** This is the essence of the nazirite: he creates an additional channel for holiness to enter into the world. The attendant prohibitions are only the consequences of this special state.

**(9) If a person dies suddenly near him:** The Hebrew here uses the expression *be-peta’ pit’om*, “due to an unexpected suddenness.” The double intensifier further emphasizes that the nazirite’s defilement is the result of an event that could not have been anticipated (see Num. 6:11).

**Defiling his consecrated hair:** The nazirite’s physical contact with a corpse, even if it happened against his will, completely cancels the observance of his vow heretofore. But drinking wine and haircutting have no such power. Contact with death is a desecration of the Divine and everything sacred, which, in essence, are life, and they manifest themselves in the life force. Defilement by a corpse therefore negates the previous period of observance.

**(11) The priest shall offer ... and make expiation on his behalf for the guilt that he incurred through the corpse:** Although the defilement was unintentional and not the result of negligence, the Torah nevertheless places a share of the blame on the nazirite himself.

A person who takes upon himself to rise above the required standard is held to a higher level of responsibility than an ordinary person. The nazirite should therefore have foreseen every problem that might arise – to foresee even the unforeseeable, as it were. (When the Torah stressed in Num. 6:9 the “unexpected suddenness” of the defilement, it was in order to make this point.)

**The priest shall offer one as a sin offering:** What is the sin for which this offering atones? In the direct sense, this sacrifice atones for the nazirite’s sin of having come in contact with impurity, because he

failed to foresee his defilement by the dead, and did not take proper precautions to guard himself against it.

But it is also possible that the vow of nazirhood is itself in some sense a sin on his part: since he was ultimately defiled, this is an indication that he took on more than he was able to fulfill, and such an attempt to “jump above and ahead of oneself” is wrong. The Talmud relates that Simon the Righteous would never partake of a nazirite’s sin offering, because he believed that in most cases a vow of nazirhood is a manifestation of self-pride and conceit (Nedarim 9b).

**(13) This is the ritual for the nazirite: On the day that his term as nazirite is completed, he shall be brought to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting:** The nazirite comes nearest to the Almighty not during his period of ecstatic exaltation, but only when at the end of the term of his vow he returns to a normal lifestyle.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, he is brought to the Tent of the Meeting only on the final day of his term as nazirite.

**(17) He shall offer the ram as a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord, together with the basket of unleavened cakes; the priest shall also offer the meal offerings and the libations:** The nazirite’s sacrifices include all four categories of Temple offerings. Namely, three animal offerings:

- (i) *Olah*, a “burnt offering.”
- (ii) *Chattat*, a “sin offering.”
- (iii) *Shelamim*, a “peace offering.”
- (iv) *Minchah*, a “meal offering of flour.”

In this sense we can compare the nazirite’s sacrifices to the *milu’im* – the High Priest’s initiation sacrifices that symbolize and confirm his promotion to that elevated status (as described in Exod. 29:1 ff.).

**(18) The nazirite shall then shave his consecrated hair, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting:** By doing so the nazirite renounces his former “High Priest” status.

And take the locks of his consecrated hair and put them on the fire that is under the sacrifice of well-being: He simultaneously offers that

<sup>22</sup> Likewise, the essence of the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac, is Abraham’s return to his normal, everyday life. See *Bible Dynamics* on Gen. 22.

hair as a sacrifice and destroys it completely. The nazirite must not preserve that hair as a keepsake, lest he come to worship it as a symbol of his achievements.

**(19-20) The priest shall take the shoulder of the ram ..., one unleavened cake ..., and one unleavened wafer, and place them on the hands of the nazirite after he has shaved his consecrated hair. The priest shall elevate them ... before the Lord:** Only after shaving his hair and returning to his prior, normal state is the nazirite worthy to receive parts of the sacrifices on his hands and dedicate them to the Almighty.

**After that the nazirite may drink wine:** More literally, the Hebrew should be translated as, “After that the nazirite *shall* drink wine.”

All three prohibitions of nazirhood are now lifted, but only this one is mentioned explicitly. Moreover, it is formulated not merely as permission, but as an instruction: The nazirite *shall* drink wine. He must return to his former, normal life. Only by his doing so can the true purpose of his nazirite vow be realized.

#### § 5.6. THE PRIESTLY BLESSING (6:22-27)

כב וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: כג דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־בְּנָיו לֵאמֹר כה  
 תְּבָרְכוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲמֹר לָהֶם:  
 כד יְבָרְכֶךָ יְיָ וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ:  
 כה יְאֹר יְיָ | פָּגְיוֹ אֱלֹהִים וַיַּחַדְּךָ:  
 כו יִשְׂאֵא יְיָ | פָּגְיוֹ אֱלֹהִים וְיִשְׂמֵם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:  
 כז וְשִׂמוֹ אֶת־שְׂמִי עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָנִי אֲבָרְכֶם:

(22) **The Lord spoke to Moses:**

(23) **Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them:**

(24) **The Lord bless you and protect you!**

(25) **The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you!**

(26) **The Lord bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace!**

**(27) Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.**

**(23) Thus shall you bless the people of Israel:** Here the Torah commands that Aaron and his sons must bless the Jewish nation regularly, as must also their descendants the priests do for all generations to come. The Priestly Blessing has the power to unite all the people of Israel.

**Thus shall you bless:** The *birkat kohanim*, “the Blessing of the Priests,” serves to maintain God’s ongoing connection with the entire Jewish nation and with each individual Jew. It presents a general scheme of human development that consists of three ascending levels: material, mental, and spiritual.

The blessing of the nation by the *kohanim* was an important component of the Temple service. It later passed also into the liturgy, and still survives today as the only remaining “special *kohen* moment” of our synagogue service. In the Land of Israel the *kohanim* bless the people every day, while in the Diaspora they do so only on major festivals. The rationale for that difference is stated as follows. “The Priestly Blessings require a state of joy. In the Land of Israel every day is joyful, but everywhere else joy is not constant; it exists only on the festivals.”

A silver scroll on which the text of the Priestly Blessing is engraved, dating from the eighth century BCE, has been found at an archaeological site in Jerusalem. It is the oldest known surviving passage of the Hebrew scriptures found to date.

**(24) The Lord bless you and protect you!:** The material and physical aspects – a dignified, successful, and secure life – comprise the first and most basic level of the blessing. Alone, these are, of course, not sufficient, but they are necessary. In the Torah’s view, material success is a precondition for proper spiritual advancement.

**(25) The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you!:** Translated literally, the first half of this passage reads, “May the Lord illuminate you with his countenance.” This verse is the second of the three levels mentioned previously – the mental and psychological. Receiving illumination from the Divine countenance means that a person can live a life of joy that is filled with meaning. And the meaning of that grace is that the Almighty will bestow this benefit on each Jew, even if they are not fully deserving of it.

**(26) The Lord bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace!:** Translated literally, the first half of this passage reads, “May the Lord turn His face unto you.” This is the third level, the spiritual. Besides giving mercy and grace, the Almighty also turns His face unto each individual – he maintains a dialogue with every person. Receiving the “illumination of his countenance” (Num. 6:25) is a one-sided action: He illuminates, and they receive. But here, “May the Lord turn His face unto you” – there is two-way contact, i.e., there is dialogue. God will illuminate you with His countenance, and at the same time also give ear to what you have to say.

**And grant you peace!:** Hebrew *shalom*, meaning “peace,” is very closely related to *shalem*, meaning “whole,” “complete.” Peace means not merely the absence of war and unrest, but also wholeness, fullness. Achieving true wholeness is possible only at this level, which combines physical, psychological, and spiritual advancement.

**(27) Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them:** Ultimately, is not the priests who bless the people, but God. The priests only recite the words of the blessing, making them audible and recognizable to the people.

## § 6. THE CHIEFTAINS' GIFTS TO THE SANCTUARY

### § 6.1. THE GIFTS OF THE OXEN AND THE CARTS (7:1-9)

א וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם בְּלוֹת מִשֵּׁה לְהַקִּים אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן וַיִּמְשַׁח אֹתוֹ וַיְקַדֵּשׁ  
אֹתוֹ וְאֶת־כָּל־כֵּלָיו וְאֶת־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְאֶת־כָּל־כֵּלָיו וַיִּמְשַׁחֵם וַיְקַדֵּשׁ  
אֹתָם: ב וַיִּקְרִיבוּ נְשֵׂאֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רֹאשֵׁי בֵּית אֲבֹתָם הֵם נְשֵׂאֵי הַמַּטֹּת  
הֵם הָעֹמְדִים עַל־הַפְּקָדִים: ג וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת־קַרְבָּנָם לִפְנֵי יְיָ שֵׁשׁ־עֶגְלֹת  
צֶבַע וּשְׁנֵי עֶשֶׂר בָּקָר עֶגְלָה עַל־שְׁנֵי הַנְּשָׂאִים וְשׂוֹר לְאֶחָד וַיִּקְרִיבוּ  
אוֹתָם לִפְנֵי הַמִּשְׁכָּן: ד וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ה קַח מֵאֹתָם  
וְהִזֵּי לַעֲבֹד אֶת־עַבְדְּתָא אֵהָל מוֹעֵד וְנִתְּתָה אוֹתָם אֶל־הַלְוִיִּם אִישׁ  
כְּפִי עַבְדְּתוֹ: ו וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הָעֶגְלֹת וְאֶת־הַבָּקָר וַיִּתֵּן אוֹתָם אֶל־  
הַלְוִיִּם: ז אֵת | שְׁתֵּי הָעֶגְלֹת וְאֵת אַרְבַּעַת הַבָּקָר נָתַן לִבְנֵי גֵרְשׁוֹן כְּפִי  
עַבְדְּתָם: ח וְאֵת | אַרְבַּע הָעֶגְלֹת וְאֵת שְׁמֹנֶת הַבָּקָר נָתַן לִבְנֵי מְרָרִי כְּפִי  
עַבְדְּתָם בֵּדל אֵיתָמָר בֶּן־אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן: ט וְלִבְנֵי קָהָת לֹא נָתַן כִּי־עַבְדְּתָא  
הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֲלֵהֶם בַּכֶּתֶף יִשְׂאוּ:

(1) On the day that Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle, he anointed and consecrated it and all its furnishings, as well as the altar and its utensils. When he had anointed and consecrated them,

(2) the chieftains of Israel, the heads of ancestral houses, namely, the chieftains of the tribes, those who were in charge of enrollment, drew near

- (3) **and brought their offering before the Lord: six draught carts and twelve oxen, a cart for every two chieftains and an ox for each one. When they had brought them before the Tabernacle,**
- (4) **the Lord said to Moses:**
- (5) **Accept these from them for use in the service of the Tent of Meeting, and give them to the Levites according to their respective services.**
- (6) **Moses took the carts and the oxen and gave them to the Levites.**
- (7) **Two carts and four oxen he gave to the Gershonites, as required for their service,**
- (8) **and four carts and eight oxen he gave to the Merarites, as required for their service – under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest.**
- (9) **But to the Kohathites he did not give any; since theirs was the service of the [most] sacred objects, their portage was by shoulder.**

The final section of weekly portion *Naso* speaks of the connection that the tribes forge with the Tabernacle. Now that each individual has formulated the proper framework of his or her relationship with the Tabernacle (as expressed in the ideas of moving closer to holiness or temporarily further away from it), and the priests' blessing of the people is also in place, Israel's connection with the Sanctuary at a higher, national level must likewise be actualized. This happens through the gifts that the chieftain of each tribe presents to the Tabernacle.

**(1) On the day that Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle:** Here the Torah departs from the actual sequence of events. The narrative of this book, *Bemidbar* (Numbers), began on the first day of the second month, Iyar, the month following the first anniversary of the Exodus. However, the dedication of the Tabernacle to be described here happened one month earlier, on the first of Nisan, two weeks before that first anniversary of the Exodus.

**(2) The chieftains of Israel, the heads of ancestral houses, namely, the chieftains of the tribes ... drew near:** They are simultaneously the

chieftains of Israel and the chieftains of their respective tribes, i.e., each chieftain combines responsibility for his tribe and a sense of community with the entire nation.

**Those who were in charge of enrollment:** Since the same chieftains (Num. 1:5-15) were responsible for the census that was conducted before the journey through the wilderness was undertaken, their offering to the Tabernacle can be seen also as preparation for that journey.

**(3) And brought their offering before the Lord:** six draught carts and twelve oxen: This concretely unites the Levites with all of Israel. Transporting the Tabernacle is not the concern of the Levites exclusively; rather, all twelve tribes participated by virtue of their offerings.

**(4-5) The Lord said to Moses:** Accept these from them: Why must God explicitly instruct Moses to accept these gifts? It is because the offering of oxen and carts was not originally a command received from Above, but only an “initiative from below.” At first Moses does not approve of this initiative, but he agrees to it only after receiving Divine direction.

This topic of “initiative from below” – extraordinarily important and at the same time problematic – becomes especially relevant in the next weekly portion, *Behaalotecha*, which addresses the conflict of humility and insolence – one of the central themes of the first part of the book of Numbers.

**(7-8) Two carts ... he gave to the Gershonites ... and four carts ... he gave to the Merarites:** The burden of the Gershonites (the cloths and the coverings, see Num. 4:24 ff.) was lighter than the burden of the Merarites (who were responsible for the planks, bars, and posts of the Tabernacle and its enclosure, see Num. 4:31 ff.). The Merarites therefore received twice as many wagons.

**(9) But to the Kohathites he did not give any; since theirs was the service of the [most] sacred objects, their portorage was by shoulder:** The Kohathites were responsible for the Temple vessels directly associated with Divine revelation, and these could not be transported on carts. In this sense, the outermost layer of the Temple's sanctity (the pillars and coverings of the Tabernacle and the enclosure) relates, inter alia, with man's lower instincts (as symbolized by animals transporting these components of the Sanctuary), but its internal

content – the Temple vessels – has its foundations only in the Divine soul that is uniquely human.

## § 6.2. OFFERINGS FOR THE DEDICATION OF THE TABERNACLE (7:10-88)

וַיִּקְרִיבוּ הַנְּשִׂאִים אֶת חֲנֻכַּת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ בַּיּוֹם הַמִּשְׁחָ אֹתוֹ וַיִּקְרִיבוּ  
הַנְּשִׂאִים אֶת־קָרְבָּנָם לִפְנֵי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ: יא וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה נְשִׂיא אָחִיד  
לַיּוֹם נְשִׂיא אָחִיד לַיּוֹם יִקְרִיבוּ אֶת־קָרְבָּנָם לְחֻנֻּכַּת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ:

יב וַיְהִי הַמִּקְרִיב בַּיּוֹם הַרְאִשׁוֹן אֶת־קָרְבָּנֹו נְחֹשֶׁן בֶּן־עַמִּינָדָב לְמִטָּה  
יְהוּדָה: יג וַקְרָבֵנוּ קַעֲרַת־בַּסֹּף אַחַת שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָה מִשְׁקָלָהּ מִזְרָק  
אָחִיד כֶּסֶף שְׁבַע־עִים שֶׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁנֵי־הֶם | מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת בְּלוּלָה  
בְּשֶׁמֶן לְמִנְחָה: יד כֹּף אַחַת עֶשְׂרֵה זָהָב מְלֵאָה קִטְרֶת: טו פֶּר אָחִיד  
בֶּן־בְּקָר אֵיל אָחִיד כֶּבֶשׂ־אָחִיד בֶּן־שָׁנָתוֹ לְעֵלָה: טז שְׁעִיר־עִזִּים אָחִיד  
לְחֻטָּאת: יז וּלְזִבַּח הַשְּׁלָמִים בְּקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵילִם חֲמִשָּׁה עֶתְדִים חֲמִשָּׁה  
כֶּבֶשִׁים בְּנֵי־שָׁנָה חֲמִשָּׁה זֶה קָרְבָּן נְחֹשֶׁן בֶּן־עַמִּינָדָב:

יח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁנִי הַקָּרִיב נִתְנָאֵל בֶּן־צֹעֵר נְשִׂיא יִשְׁשַׁכָּר: יט הַקָּרִב אֶת־  
קָרְבָּנֹו קַעֲרַת־בַּסֹּף אַחַת שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָה מִשְׁקָלָהּ מִזְרָק אָחִיד כֶּסֶף  
שְׁבַע־עִים שֶׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁנֵי־הֶם | מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן  
לְמִנְחָה: כ כֹּף אַחַת עֶשְׂרֵה זָהָב מְלֵאָה קִטְרֶת: כא פֶּר אָחִיד בֶּן־  
בְּקָר אֵיל אָחִיד כֶּבֶשׂ־אָחִיד בֶּן־שָׁנָתוֹ לְעֵלָה: כב שְׁעִיר־עִזִּים אָחִיד  
לְחֻטָּאת: כג וּלְזִבַּח הַשְּׁלָמִים בְּקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵילִם חֲמִשָּׁה עֶתְדִים חֲמִשָּׁה  
כֶּבֶשִׁים בְּנֵי־שָׁנָה חֲמִשָּׁה זֶה קָרְבָּן נִתְנָאֵל בֶּן־צֹעֵר:

כד בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי נְשִׂיא לִבְנֵי זְבוּלוֹן אֱלִיאָב בֶּן־חֲלוּן: כה קָרְבָּנֹו קַעֲרַת־  
בַּסֹּף אַחַת שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָה מִשְׁקָלָהּ מִזְרָק אָחִיד כֶּסֶף שְׁבַע־עִים שֶׁקֶל  
בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁנֵי־הֶם | מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן לְמִנְחָה: כו כֹּף אַחַת  
עֶשְׂרֵה זָהָב מְלֵאָה קִטְרֶת: כז פֶּר אָחִיד בֶּן־בְּקָר אֵיל אָחִיד כֶּבֶשׂ־אָחִיד  
בֶּן־שָׁנָתוֹ לְעֵלָה: כח שְׁעִיר־עִזִּים אָחִיד לְחֻטָּאת: כט וּלְזִבַּח הַשְּׁלָמִים  
בְּקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵילִם חֲמִשָּׁה עֶתְדִים חֲמִשָּׁה כֶּבֶשִׁים בְּנֵי־שָׁנָה חֲמִשָּׁה זֶה  
קָרְבָּן אֱלִיאָב בֶּן־חֲלוּן:

ל ביום הרביעי נשיא לבני ראובן אליצור בן־שדיאור: לא קרבנו  
 קֶעֶרֶת־בָּסָף אחת שלשים ומאה משקלה מזרק אחד כֶּסֶף שבָּעִים  
 שֶׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁנֵי־הֶם | מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן לְמִנְחָה: לֹב כֶּף  
 אחת עֶשְׂרֵה זָהָב מְלֵאָה קִטְרֶת: לֹב פֶּר אֶחָד בֶּן־בָּקָר אֵיל אֶחָד  
 כֶּבֶשׂ־אֶחָד בֶּן־שְׁנָתוֹ לְעֹלָה: לֹב שְׁעִיר־עִזִּים אֶחָד לְחֻטָּאת: לֹב וּלְזֹבַח  
 הַשְּׁלָמִים בָּקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵילִם חֲמִשָּׁה עֲתֻדִים חֲמִשָּׁה כֶּבֶשִׁים בְּנֵי־שְׁנָה  
 חֲמִשָּׁה זֶה קֶרְבֵּן אֱלִיצוֹר בֶּן־שְׁדִיאוֹר:

לו ביום החמישי נשיא לבני שמעון שלמיאל בן־צורישידי: לו קרבנו  
 קֶעֶרֶת־בָּסָף אחת שלשים ומאה משקלה מזרק אחד כֶּסֶף שבָּעִים  
 שֶׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁנֵי־הֶם | מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן לְמִנְחָה: לֹב כֶּף  
 אחת עֶשְׂרֵה זָהָב מְלֵאָה קִטְרֶת: לֹט פֶּר אֶחָד בֶּן־בָּקָר אֵיל אֶחָד  
 כֶּבֶשׂ־אֶחָד בֶּן־שְׁנָתוֹ לְעֹלָה: מֹ שְׁעִיר־עִזִּים אֶחָד לְחֻטָּאת: מֹ וּלְזֹבַח  
 הַשְּׁלָמִים בָּקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵילִם חֲמִשָּׁה עֲתֻדִים חֲמִשָּׁה כֶּבֶשִׁים בְּנֵי־שְׁנָה  
 חֲמִשָּׁה זֶה קֶרְבֵּן שְׁלֵמִיאל בֶּן־צוֹרִישִׁדִי:

מב ביום הששי נשיא לבני גד אליסף בן־דעואל: מב קרבנו קֶעֶרֶת־  
 בָּסָף אחת שלשים ומאה משקלה מזרק אחד כֶּסֶף שבָּעִים שֶׁקֶל  
 בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁנֵי־הֶם | מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן לְמִנְחָה: מֹד כֶּף  
 אחת עֶשְׂרֵה זָהָב מְלֵאָה קִטְרֶת: מֹה פֶּר אֶחָד בֶּן־בָּקָר אֵיל אֶחָד  
 כֶּבֶשׂ־אֶחָד בֶּן־שְׁנָתוֹ לְעֹלָה: מֹו שְׁעִיר־עִזִּים אֶחָד לְחֻטָּאת: מֹו וּלְזֹבַח  
 הַשְּׁלָמִים בָּקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵילִם חֲמִשָּׁה עֲתֻדִים חֲמִשָּׁה כֶּבֶשִׁים בְּנֵי־שְׁנָה  
 חֲמִשָּׁה זֶה קֶרְבֵּן אֱלִיסָף בֶּן־דְּעוּאֵל:

מג ביום השביעי נשיא לבני אפרים אלישמע בן־עמיהוד: מג קרבנו  
 קֶעֶרֶת־בָּסָף אחת שלשים ומאה משקלה מזרק אחד כֶּסֶף שבָּעִים  
 שֶׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁנֵי־הֶם | מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן לְמִנְחָה: נֹכ כֶּף  
 אחת עֶשְׂרֵה זָהָב מְלֵאָה קִטְרֶת: נֹא פֶּר אֶחָד בֶּן־בָּקָר אֵיל אֶחָד  
 כֶּבֶשׂ־אֶחָד בֶּן־שְׁנָתוֹ לְעֹלָה: נֹב שְׁעִיר־עִזִּים אֶחָד לְחֻטָּאת: נֹג וּלְזֹבַח  
 הַשְּׁלָמִים בָּקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵילִם חֲמִשָּׁה עֲתֻדִים חֲמִשָּׁה כֶּבֶשִׁים בְּנֵי־שְׁנָה  
 חֲמִשָּׁה זֶה קֶרְבֵּן אֱלִישְׁמַע בֶּן־עֲמִיהוּד:

נד ביום השמיני נשיא לבני מנשה גמליאל בן־פדהצור: נה קרבנו  
 קֶעֶרֶת־בָּסָף אחת שלשים ומאה משקלה מזרק אחד כֶּסֶף שבָּעִים

שָׁקַל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁנֵיהֶם | מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן לְמִנְחָה: <sup>נו</sup> כֹּף אַחַת עֲשָׂרָה זָהָב מְלֵאָה קִטְרֶת: <sup>נז</sup> פֶּר אֶחָד בְּזֶבֶק אֵיל אֶחָד כֶּבֶשׂ-אֶחָד בְּזֶשְׁנָתוֹ לְעֹלָה: <sup>נח</sup> שְׁעִיר-עִזִּים אֶחָד לְחֻטָּאת: <sup>נט</sup> וּלְזִבַּח הַשְּׁלָמִים בְּקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵילִם חֲמִשָּׁה עֲתָדִים חֲמִשָּׁה כֶּבֶשִׂים בְּנֵי-שָׁנָה חֲמִשָּׁה זֶה קָרְבַּן גְּמִיאֵל בְּזֶפְדֵּהצֹר:

<sup>ס</sup> בַּיּוֹם הַתְּשִׁיעִי נָשִׂיא לְבָנֵי בְנִימָן אַבִּידָן בְּזֶגְדֵּעֲנֵי: <sup>סא</sup> קָרְבָּנוֹ קַעֲרַת-כֶּסֶף אַחַת שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָה מִשְׁקָלָהּ מִזְרָק אֶחָד כֶּסֶף שִׁבְעִים שֶׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁנֵיהֶם | מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן לְמִנְחָה: <sup>סב</sup> כֹּף אַחַת עֲשָׂרָה זָהָב מְלֵאָה קִטְרֶת: <sup>סג</sup> פֶּר אֶחָד בְּזֶבֶק אֵיל אֶחָד כֶּבֶשׂ-אֶחָד בְּזֶשְׁנָתוֹ לְעֹלָה: <sup>סד</sup> שְׁעִיר-עִזִּים אֶחָד לְחֻטָּאת: <sup>סה</sup> וּלְזִבַּח הַשְּׁלָמִים בְּקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵילִם חֲמִשָּׁה עֲתָדִים חֲמִשָּׁה כֶּבֶשִׂים בְּנֵי-שָׁנָה חֲמִשָּׁה זֶה קָרְבַּן אַבִּידָן בְּזֶגְדֵּעֲנֵי:

<sup>סו</sup> בַּיּוֹם הָעֲשִׂירִי נָשִׂיא לְבָנֵי דָן אַחִיעֶזֶר בְּזֶעֱמִישַׁדִּי: <sup>סז</sup> קָרְבָּנוֹ קַעֲרַת-כֶּסֶף אַחַת שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָה מִשְׁקָלָהּ מִזְרָק אֶחָד כֶּסֶף שִׁבְעִים שֶׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁנֵיהֶם | מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן לְמִנְחָה: <sup>סח</sup> כֹּף אַחַת עֲשָׂרָה זָהָב מְלֵאָה קִטְרֶת: <sup>סט</sup> פֶּר אֶחָד בְּזֶבֶק אֵיל אֶחָד כֶּבֶשׂ-אֶחָד בְּזֶשְׁנָתוֹ לְעֹלָה: <sup>ע</sup> שְׁעִיר-עִזִּים אֶחָד לְחֻטָּאת: <sup>עא</sup> וּלְזִבַּח הַשְּׁלָמִים בְּקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵילִם חֲמִשָּׁה עֲתָדִים חֲמִשָּׁה כֶּבֶשִׂים בְּנֵי-שָׁנָה חֲמִשָּׁה זֶה קָרְבַּן אַחִיעֶזֶר בְּזֶעֱמִישַׁדִּי:

<sup>עב</sup> בַּיּוֹם עֲשָׂרִי עֶשֶׂר יוֹם נָשִׂיא לְבָנֵי אֲשֶׁר פְּגַעִיאֵל בְּזֶעֱכָרָן: <sup>עג</sup> קָרְבָּנוֹ קַעֲרַת-כֶּסֶף אַחַת שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָה מִשְׁקָלָהּ מִזְרָק אֶחָד כֶּסֶף שִׁבְעִים שֶׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁנֵיהֶם | מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן לְמִנְחָה: <sup>עד</sup> כֹּף אַחַת עֲשָׂרָה זָהָב מְלֵאָה קִטְרֶת: <sup>עה</sup> פֶּר אֶחָד בְּזֶבֶק אֵיל אֶחָד כֶּבֶשׂ-אֶחָד בְּזֶשְׁנָתוֹ לְעֹלָה: <sup>עו</sup> שְׁעִיר-עִזִּים אֶחָד לְחֻטָּאת: <sup>עז</sup> וּלְזִבַּח הַשְּׁלָמִים בְּקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵילִם חֲמִשָּׁה עֲתָדִים חֲמִשָּׁה כֶּבֶשִׂים בְּנֵי-שָׁנָה חֲמִשָּׁה זֶה קָרְבַּן פְּגַעִיאֵל בְּזֶעֱכָרָן:

<sup>עח</sup> בַּיּוֹם שְׁנַיִם עֶשֶׂר יוֹם נָשִׂיא לְבָנֵי נַפְתָּלִי אַחִירַע בְּזֶעֲיָגוֹ: <sup>עט</sup> קָרְבָּנוֹ קַעֲרַת-כֶּסֶף אַחַת שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָה מִשְׁקָלָהּ מִזְרָק אֶחָד כֶּסֶף שִׁבְעִים שֶׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁנֵיהֶם | מְלֵאִים סֶלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן לְמִנְחָה: <sup>פ</sup> כֹּף אַחַת עֲשָׂרָה זָהָב מְלֵאָה קִטְרֶת: <sup>פא</sup> פֶּר אֶחָד בְּזֶבֶק אֵיל אֶחָד

כָּבֹשׁ-אֶחָד בְּיוֹם-שְׁנֵיתוֹ לְעֹלָה: כַּבֹּשׁ-רֵעֵי-עֲזִים אֶחָד לְחֻטָּאת: פֶּגַע וּלְזֶבַח  
הַשְּׁלָמִים בְּקָרָב שְׁנַיִם אֵילִם חֲמִשָּׁה עֲתֻדִים חֲמִשָּׁה כִּבְשִׁים בְּגִי-שֹׁנָה  
חֲמִשָּׁה זֶה קָרְבַּן אַחִירָע בְּיוֹם-עֵינָן:

פד זאת | חֲנֻכַּת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ בְּיוֹם הַמִּשָּׁח אִתּוֹ מֵאֵת נְשִׂאֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
קָעֵת כֶּסֶף שְׁתֵּים עָשָׂר מִזְרְקֵי-כֶסֶף שְׁנַיִם עֶשֶׂר כִּפּוֹת זָהָב שְׁתֵּים  
עָשָׂר: פה שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָה הַקְּעָרָה הָאֶחָת כֶּסֶף וְשִׁבְעִים הַמִּזְרָק  
הָאֶחָד כָּל כֶּסֶף הַכֵּלִים אֲלֵפִים וְאַרְבַּע-מֵאוֹת בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ: פו כִּפּוֹת  
זָהָב שְׁתֵּים-עָשָׂר מְלֵאֹת קְטֹרֶת עָשָׂרָה עָשָׂרָה הֶכֶף בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ  
כָּל-זָהָב הַכִּפּוֹת עֶשְׂרִים וּמֵאָה: פז כָּל-הַבְּקָר לְעֹלָה שְׁנַיִם עֶשֶׂר פָּרִים  
אֵילִם שְׁנַיִם-עֶשֶׂר כִּבְשִׁים בְּגִי-שֹׁנָה שְׁנַיִם עֶשֶׂר וּמִנְחָתָם וְשַׁעֲרֵי  
עֲזִים שְׁנַיִם עֶשֶׂר לְחֻטָּאת: פח וְכֹל בְּקָר | זֶבַח הַשְּׁלָמִים עֶשְׂרִים  
וְאַרְבָּעָה פָּרִים אֵילִם שְׁשִׁים עֲתֻדִים שְׁשִׁים כִּבְשִׁים בְּגִי-שֹׁנָה שְׁשִׁים  
זאת חֲנֻכַּת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אַחֲרֵי הַמִּשָּׁח אִתּוֹ:

(10) The chieftains also brought the dedication offering for the altar upon its being anointed. As the chieftains were presenting their offerings before the altar,

(11) the Lord said to Moses: Let them present their offerings for the dedication of the altar, one chieftain each day.

(12) The one who presented his offering on the first day was Nahshon son of Amminadab of the tribe of Judah.

(13) His offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering;

(14) one gold ladle of 10 shekels, filled with incense;

(15) one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt offering;

(16) one goat for a sin offering;

(17) and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Nahshon son of Amminadab.

(18) On the second day, Nethanel son of Zuar, chieftain of Issachar, made his offering.

**(19) He presented as his offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering;**

**(20) one gold ladle of 10 shekels, filled with incense;**

**(21) one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt offering;**

**(22) one goat for a sin offering;**

**(23) and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Nethanel son of Zuar.**

**(24) On the third day, it was the chieftain of the Zebulunites, Eliab son of Helon.**

**(25) His offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering;**

**(26) one gold ladle of 10 shekels, filled with incense;**

**(27) one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt offering;**

**(28) one goat for a sin offering;**

**(29) and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Eliab son of Helon.**

**(30) On the fourth day, it was the chieftain of the Reubenites, Elizur son of Shedeur.**

**(31) His offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering;**

**(32) one gold ladle of 10 shekels, filled with incense;**

**(33) one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt offering;**

**(34) one goat for a sin offering;**

(35) and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Elizur son of Shedeur.

(36) On the fifth day, it was the chieftain of the Simeonites, Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai.

(37) His offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering;

(38) one gold ladle of 10 shekels, filled with incense;

(39) one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt offering;

(40) one goat for a sin offering;

(41) and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai.

(42) On the sixth day, it was the chieftain of the Gadites, Eliasaph son of Deuel.

(43) His offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering;

(44) one gold ladle of 10 shekels, filled with incense;

(45) one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt offering;

(46) one goat for a sin offering;

(47) and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Eliasaph son of Deuel.

(48) On the seventh day, it was the chieftain of the Ephraimites, Elishama son of Ammihud.

(49) His offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering;

(50) one gold ladle of 10 shekels, filled with incense;

**(51) one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt offering;**

**(52) one goat for a sin offering;**

**(53) and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Elishama son of Ammihud.**

**(54) On the eighth day, it was the chieftain of the Manassites, Gamaliel son of Pedahzur.**

**(55) His offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering;**

**(56) one gold ladle of 10 shekels, filled with incense;**

**(57) one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt offering;**

**(58) one goat for a sin offering;**

**(59) and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Gamaliel son of Pedahzur.**

**(60) On the ninth day, it was the chieftain of the Benjaminites, Abidan son of Gideoni.**

**(61) His offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering;**

**(62) one gold ladle of 10 shekels, filled with incense;**

**(63) one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt offering;**

**(64) one goat for a sin offering;**

**(65) and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Abidan son of Gideoni.**

**(66) On the tenth day, it was the chieftain of the Danites, Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai.**

(67) **His offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering;**

(68) **one gold ladle of 10 shekels, filled with incense;**

(69) **one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt offering;**

(70) **one goat for a sin offering;**

(71) **and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai.**

(72) **On the eleventh day, it was the chieftain of the Asherites, Pagiel son of Ocran.**

(73) **His offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering;**

(74) **one gold ladle of 10 shekels, filled with incense;**

(75) **one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt offering;**

(76) **one goat for a sin offering;**

(77) **and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Pagiel son of Ocran.**

(78) **On the twelfth day, it was the chieftain of the Naphtalites, Ahira son of Enan.**

(79) **His offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering;**

(80) **one gold ladle of 10 shekels, filled with incense;**

(81) **one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt offering;**

(82) **one goat for a sin offering;**

(83) **and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Ahira son of Enan.**

(84) **This was the dedication offering for the altar from the chieftains of Israel upon its be-ing anointed: silver bowls, 12; silver basins, 12; gold ladles, 12.**

(85) **Silver per bowl, 130; per basin, 70. Total silver of vessels, 2,400 sanctuary shekels.**

(86) **The 12 gold ladles filled with incense—10 sanctuary shekels per ladle – total gold of the ladles, 120.**

(87) **Total of herd animals for burnt offerings, 12 bulls; of rams, 12; of yearling lambs, 12 – with their proper meal offerings; of goats for sin offerings, 12.**

(88) **Total of herd animals for sacrifices of well-being, 24 bulls; of rams, 60; of he-goats, 60; of yearling lambs, 60. That was the dedication offering for the altar after its anointing.**

**(10) The chieftains also brought the dedication offering for the altar:** Having seen that their offering of oxen and carts was accepted, the chieftains now embrace a new initiative, and make offerings in honor of the consecration of the altar.

**(11) Let them present their offerings ... one chieftain each day:** Although the Sanctuary belongs to the entire nation, each tribe must have its own special connection with it. In order to give each tribe an opportunity to establish such a relationship, each is given its own day for bringing its offerings.

**One chieftain each day:** The sequence of offerings has been established by God, but the initiative itself belongs to the chieftain of each tribe. The offering of gifts from the chieftain of each tribe to the Temple and to the Levites completes the process of connecting that tribe to the larger system, and to the Shekhinah's presence among the Jewish people.

The twelve days of the chieftains' offerings spanned almost the entire first half of the month of Nisan, after which the nation was commanded

to celebrate their second Passover, exactly one year following the Exodus itself.

**(12-18) The one who presented his offering on the first day was Nahshon son of Amminadab of the tribe of Judah. ... On the second day, Nethanel son of Zuar, chieftain of Issachar, made his offering:** Beginning with the next (second) day, Nethanel of the tribe of Issachar, and likewise the chieftains of the remaining tribes on all the following days, will each be identified as “chieftain of such-and-such tribe.” Only Nahshon son of Amminadab on this first day was not designated by the title “chieftain of the tribe of Judah.” This indicates that for Nahshon – and for the tribe of Judah in general – the needs of the entire Jewish nation are the dominant value, more important to them than merely promoting their own individual tribal interests. And this is why the tribe of Judah will ultimately be chosen to receive the kingdom and reign over the entire nation.

The sequence of these offerings establishes a new hierarchical system, wherein the relative priority of the tribes is determined not by birth order, but by their physical locations with respect to the Tabernacle while journeying through the wilderness, and during encampment.

**(12-24) On the first day the tribe of Judah ... On the second day Issachar ... On the third day ... the Zebulunites:** These are the three tribes of the camp of Judah (see Num. 2:3 ff.). They camp on the east and march first.

**(30-42) On the fourth day the Reubenites ... On the fifth day the Simeonites ... On the sixth day the Gadites:** These are the three tribes of the camp of Reuben (Num. 2:10 ff.), who camp on the south and march second.

**(48-60) On the seventh day the Ephraimites ... On the eighth day the Manassites ... On the ninth day the Benjaminites:** This is the camp of the sons of Rachel's sons (Num. 2:18 ff.), who camp on the west and march third.

**(66-78) On the tenth day the Danites ... On the eleventh day the Asherites ... On the twelfth day the Naphtalites:** This is the camp of the sons of the concubines (Num. 2:25 ff.), who camp on the north, and march last – “the rear guard of all the divisions” (Num. 10:25).

(13..., 19..., 25..., 31..., 37..., 43..., 49..., 55..., 61..., 67..., 73..., 79...) **His offering:** one silver bowl ...: Each of these twelve groups of offerings is repeated again and again in the exact same words – twelve times the very same list. Couldn't the Torah have enumerated these offerings in detail only the first time, and then just said on the second day, "Nethanel offered the same" – and so for each of the following ten days? But the Torah chose not to do so. Instead, it repeats the entire sequence of offerings twelve times verbatim.

The reason for that can be explained as follows. Although the chieftains agreed that they would all bring identical offerings (so that there would be no envy among the tribes), each tribe brought its offering with its own individual orientation. These offerings thus symbolize completely different aspects and events in the history of the respective tribes. And because these sacrifices are only *externally* identical, the Torah could not say, "and each of the others brought the same."

The chieftains' agreeing to bringing identical offerings, and their acceptance of the given sequence of days and tribes, demonstrate that they acknowledged their fundamental mutual equality and their consent to the new tribal hierarchy and order.

**(84) This was the dedication offering for the altar from the chieftains of Israel upon its being anointed:** silver bowls, 12; silver basins, 12; gold ladles, 12: Here the Torah will tally all the offerings and summarize the data, underscoring the essential unity of all the separate but mutually complementary components. Although the offerings were brought separately in order to emphasize the individuality of each tribe, the single final count demonstrates the integration of all tribal units into a single whole.

§ 6.3. GOD'S REVELATION TO MOSES AS THE CONCLUSION  
OF THE TRIBES' OFFERINGS

פֶּט וּבָבֹא מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ וַיִּשְׁמַע אֶת-הַקּוֹל מִדְּבַר  
אֱלֹהֵי מַעַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל-אֲרוֹן הָעֵדוּת מִבֵּין שְׁנֵי הַכְּרֻבִים וַיְדַבֵּר  
אֵלָיו:

(89) **When Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, he would hear the Voice addressing him from above the cover that was on top of the Ark of the Pact between the two cherubim; thus He spoke to him.**

**When Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, he would hear the Voice ...;** thus He spoke to him: This verse establishes the connection between the tribes' offerings just completed and God's Revelation to Moses. Only when there is unity among the people can Moses receive Revelation from the Almighty.



**WEEKLY  
PORTION 3**

**BEHAALOTECHA**



## **§ 7. THE OVERALL MEANING OF WEEKLY PORTION *BEHAALOTECHA***

### **§ 7.1 COMPARING MOSES AND THE MESSIAH: ANAVAH, “HUMILITY,” VS. CHUTZPAH**

*Behaalotecha*, the third weekly portion of the book of Numbers, is pivotal to the entire book. The events of *Behaalotecha* are precursors for everything else that follows.

At first glance one gets the impression that this weekly portion is highly heterogeneous in its subject matter; it addresses diverse topics that are almost completely unrelated. First the Menorah, then the cleansing of the Levites, then the observance of Passover and the supplemental Passover, setting out on the journey, the silver trumpets and the marching order of the camps, the people’s rumblings, convocation of the seventy prophet-elders, the incident of the quails, and, finally, God’s reproach of Miriam and Aaron in the matter of Moses’ wife.

However, the impression that this weekly portion lacks a coherent topical connection is quite superficial; the entire portion is in fact united by a profound internal unity. In the paragraphs below we summarize the logic of the *Behaalotecha* portion’s construction as explained by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.

Readers might find the explanation that follows somewhat unclear if they have not yet made a detailed study of the Torah text that it elaborates. Nonetheless, we place it here in this preface to weekly portion *Behaalotecha* on the presumption that the reader will return to this preface after digesting those later chapters, to better understand what still remained unclear after a first reading.

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Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook understands weekly portion *Behaalotecha* as a description of the relationship between Moses and the *Mashiach*, “Messiah,” based on a comparison of the concepts of *anavah*, “humility, meekness, obedience,” and *chutzpah*, “brazen independence, audacity, insolence, impudence.”

The following is excerpted from Rabbi Kook’s *Shemonah Kevatzim*, “Eight Collections,” 8:157, as elucidated by Rabbi Ouri Cherki in his commentary.

***In Moses, our Teacher, are incorporated all the souls of Israel with respect to the Torah,***

Moses is connected with every Jew of the people of Israel at the level of the Torah, as it perceives and teaches each individual. When one studies the Torah (and in general any field of knowledge), an essential prerequisite is to respect the authorities – the student must be humble. That is, the teacher works within the attribute of *anavah*.

***And the Messiah unites all the souls of Israel with respect to those souls themselves.***

*Mashiach*, in contrast to Moses, is associated with every Jew of the people of Israel not within the context of the Torah, but from the perspective of their own personality.

Elsewhere Rabbi Kook quotes the verse, “The breath of our life, the Lord’s anointed (*mashiach*)” (Lam. 4:20) explaining it as follows. “The *Mashiach* is the breath of our nostrils – that is, our own essence; in him we seek our own ‘I.’ We seek and find our very own essence” (*Shemonah Kevatzim*, 3:24).

***And since the soul of the Messiah incorporates the roots of the souls of all Israel, no impudence (chutzpah) can impact the Messiah’s holiness.***

Impudence, *chutzpah*, is the position of independent decision-making, as opposed to obeying authority. If I have *chutzpah*, it is the consequence of my feeling that I have my own independent value. Since the *Mashiach* is connected precisely with this “independence” of all the souls of Israel, *chutzpah* cannot impact him negatively.

***In this respect the Messiah stands higher than the revelation of the Torah. In order to understand the Torah, one must have a sense of shame – the very opposite of impudence. As we read at the giving of the Torah: “Moses answered the people, ‘Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray’ ” (Exod. 20:17). Our sages understood that fear as shame.***

That is, the sages explained that “in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you” refers to a feeling of shame and awe before God’s greatness, without which it is impossible to teach or even to comprehend the Torah. And that feeling is *anavah*, “humility.” If insolence and impudence are the primary forces in a student’s character, there is nothing that a teacher of Torah can teach that student.

***The Messiah descends from Moab.***

Indeed he does, because King David, ancestor of the Messiah, was a descendant of Ruth the Moabite (Ruth 4:22). Moab was Lot’s grandson by his (Lot’s) own daughter, who named their son Moab, boldly proclaiming to the world that she had borne him from her own father (“Moab” = “*me-ab*,” “from [my] father,” see Gen. 19:37). Thus, Moab symbolizes brazenness, and it is no coincidence that the Messiah descends from him.

***But not only did that wreak no damage on his soul, it even gave it its shine, as David himself remarked about this, “Moab would be my washbasin” (Ps. 60:10). In the days leading up to the coming of the Messiah, insolence will multiply greatly. But this will in no way reduce the influence of his holiness.***

A washbasin is something that “adds shine.” As explained in the Talmud (Sotah 49b), at the onset of the Messianic process insolence will increase dramatically. However, that insolence detracts not a whit from the Messiah’s holiness, but on the contrary, it imparts further shine to his holiness.

***The awakening of the Messiah’s holiness occurs through the prophecy of Eldad and Medad, who speak of the war of Gog and Magog, which encompasses all matters of the Messiah’s light and the circumstances surrounding his arrival.***

That is, a veiled discussion of the Messiah is found in the Torah in the story of Eldad and Medad's prophecy, in this weekly portion *Behaalotecha* (see § 9.5 for further details).

***In the highest radiance of Adam, the first man,***

In the Kabbalah, "the highest radiance of Adam" means the level that Adam and Eve had attained before they were driven out of Eden, as the consequence of disobeying God's command never to partake of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

***the light of Moses and the light of the Mashiach were one and the same, since in reality they are one soul. But because of the world's decline that resulted from Adam's sin, Moses and the Messiah were separated, and Moses could no longer be radiant through insolence,***

Because of Adam's sin, Moses' soul and the Messiah's soul were divided. The *anavah*, "humility," went entirely to Moses, and all the *chutzpah* to the Messiah. Therefore, Moses, who is "a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth" (Num. 12:2), cannot transmit the Torah if the people are in a state of insolence.

***which is also the reason that Moses distanced himself from his wife.***

Moses distanced himself from all things that have their basis in nature (see § 9.7 for further details).

***The holiness of the wilderness generation longed for the unity of first Adam's radiance. The people therefore wanted Moses to feed them meat specifically, namely, so that he could begin to shine even in the presence of their insolence.***

They wanted Moses to master the attribute of *chutzpah* in addition to his unrivaled *anavah* (see the commentary below in this § 7.1 for further details).

***But Moses responded (11:12): "Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them?" By which he meant to say: "I cannot possibly shine with insolence."***

Moses lacks any unity of nature with the people. Unlike Adam, he did not conceive or bear them, giving birth the entire human race, and unlike the Messiah, he feels no essential unity with them except for the unity of teaching them Torah. He therefore cannot shine when

their essence – that is, when their insolence – dominates. Moses simply cannot illuminate insolence.

***The Messianic end times therefore remained hidden and unelaborated in the Torah.***

Moses makes no mention of the Messianic end times in the Torah, because the advancement of the world in the Messianic period is associated with the concept of insolence, in which Moses is unable to shine. And since Moses cannot illuminate the Messianic end times, neither can he enter the Land of Israel, which is very tightly connected to the Messianic light.

***Aaron and Miriam felt all this, and protested their brother's estrangement (perishut, "asceticism"), but still they could not restore to Moses the ability to illuminate insolence, for he ever remained in his anavah, "humility," as it is said, "Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth."***

The quality of *anavah* is so dominant in Moses that he refuses to function as the Messiah, or even to try. Any attempt by Miriam and Aaron to move him in that direction ends in failure.

***The Menorah unites in itself the holiness of the souls of Israel as concerns the people themselves.***

That is precisely why this weekly portion *Behaalotecha*, which deals with the problems involving Moses and the Messiah, begins with the commandment of lighting the Menorah.

The Menorah seems more "external" compared to the Ark that is hidden in the Holy of Holies, but it is the Menorah that shines for everyone.

The Jewish people illuminate the world primarily through the essence of their souls. That is, it is an openly visible light, like that of the Menorah, whereas the light of the Ark that is concealed in the Holy of Holies – i.e., the Torah – is a hidden light.

Therefore, Aaron, who lights the Menorah, is connected to the people more closely than he is connected to the Almighty. He "feels" the Jewish people in their naturalness. And Miriam too, for whom family connections are paramount, is by virtue of that likewise connected to

naturalness. Miriam and Aaron therefore feel keenly Moses' distancing from naturalness, and want to remedy the situation.

***To unite the light of Moses and the light of the Messiah, the soul of a ger, "a proselyte," is needed, of which Jethro is the foundation, for he is the father of all proselytes,***

Jethro is the archetypical proselyte. Only he, "a man of the peoples of the world," can connect the light of Moses, originally intended only for Israel, with the light of the Messiah, which must shine for all of mankind.

***and Moses therefore bids Jethro, "Please do not leave us, ... be our guide,"***

The literal translation is, "be eyes (*einayim*) for us." This too will be elaborated later in this weekly portion (see the commentary in § 9.2).

***and this word (*einayim*, "eyes") also connects this request with Tamar, who, in order to bring out the light of the Mashiach, "sat down at the entrance to Enaim" (Gen. 38:14).***

(Although it is the name of a place, and transliterated there as Enaim, in Hebrew it is the very same word as *einayim*, "eyes.") Tamar seduced Judah in order to produce the Messiah dynasty from him,<sup>25</sup> and David was a descendant of Perez, Judah's son from Tamar. Moses is referring to this when he asks Jethro to stay with the Jewish people in order to "be their eyes." That is, to advance the Messianic light in this world.

***But the light of the Mashiach cannot exist without the support of the light of the Torah, and therefore the topic turns immediately to the Ark that contains the Torah: "When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance, O Lord! May Your enemies be scattered, and may Your foes flee before You!"***

Thus, the path to the Land of Israel, where the Messianic light will be revealed, takes place under the guidance of the Ark, the symbol of the Divine teachings.

### ***The silver trumpets***

See the commentary below in this weekly portion (§ 8.8).

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<sup>25</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on Gen. 38.

***are man-made wind instruments,***

And in this respect the trumpets differ from the shofar, a natural instrument, made from a ram's horn.

***and in this respect, they are like the soul of the proselyte,***

who is not naturally born into the Jewish people, but joins them from the outside.

***which unites the light of the Torah***

It does so at the same level and in the same manner that the Torah came into the world at Sinai – received by man from God, the ultimate transcendental source. Thus, the Torah corresponds to Moses, who distanced and removed himself from natural causes and forces.

***with the light of the Messiah, who blows the great shofar of Redemption (Isa. 27:13),***

Unlike Moses, whom God commands to create silver trumpets, artificially made instruments that symbolize Moses' separation from nature, the Messiah blows the shofar, a ram's horn, a natural instrument. The Exodus from Egypt was a miraculous (i.e., super-natural) event, while the Messianic redemption will be a natural event, in which the natural, everyday world will be received into the domain of holiness.

Precisely because of this naturalness, the Messiah is properly characterized by the attribute of *chutzpah*. It is the attribute of a natural life, of a person who is his own self-sufficient entity. This contrasts with the attribute of *anavah*, which is the attribute of a pupil with respect to his schoolmasters.

***for then the light of Moses and the light of the Messiah shall be united, as it is written (Psalm 98:6), "With trumpets and the blast of the horn raise a shout before the LORD, the King," – both types of instruments sounding together.***

That is, the Messiah cannot arrive without the support of Moses' teachings as well, for it is the element that unites them as one.

**In summary:**

When a nation hungers for meat they are not villains. At the internal level, they yearn for greater holiness, striving to manifest holiness in their passions – in their ordinary, everyday life. They want meat, natural food, not manna, an artificial (albeit miraculous) food.

Wilderness life is a completely subordinate, dependent life. Manna is food that cannot be stored up for the morrow; thus, the people are reminded daily of their utter dependence for keeping themselves fed. The Cloud of Glory shows the people their direction of movement, and also protects them. The people is fed with filling but monotonous food, without asking about anyone's personal tastes, indifferent to anyone's personal tastes.

These are abnormal, unnatural conditions, rather like the conditions of a closed educational institution, where there is no presumption whatsoever of personal freedom – you must simply obey the curriculum. In this sense, Moses acts as a teacher in a yeshivah, rather than a leader of a nation in its own country. The holiness that he passes on to his charges is the scholastic holiness of study, not the living, dynamic holiness of independence. Thus, the people's cravings for meat are their yearnings for naturalness. And Moses is unable to cope with this kind of situation.

Moses' flaws in this case are extensions of his virtues. To receive the Torah and transmit it to the people, Moses needs enormous *anavah*, but that same *anavah* cannot but interfere with the further advancement of the nation.

At the Kabbalistic (mystical) level, we can state the problem as follows. Because of the sin that Adam and Eve committed when they ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam's soul was divided into "supernatural" holiness and "natural" holiness. These two types of holiness are at the root of Moses' soul and the Messiah's soul, respectively.

It follows that Moses' personality is realized in an artificial system, while the Messiah's personality can only be realized in a natural one.

Thus, Moses and the Messiah represent the two complementary components, as it were, of Adam's soul. The first of those, Moses' soul, can be effective only among shy, humble people. And the second, the

soul of the Messiah, is realized when people, on the contrary, are self-confident and assert their independence.

Moses therefore can govern the people (and manifest holiness) only in the wilderness, where everything is unnatural, where the operative system is a system of open miracles, in which food literally falls from the sky. It is the phase of prehistory. Moses can have no dominion in the Land of Israel, where history will unfold in ordinary, normal fashion, and the people will live a fully natural life.

By their display of *chutzpah*, the generation of the Exodus is saying to Moses that they are tired of living a schoolbook life; they want holiness in real life; they want meat! The people should be made to understand that their demands, which are in fact legitimate, will be honored at a later time, but at the moment those demands are premature. To Moses, however, their demands are unacceptable because they are antithetical to the educational process. The most essential human quality, so far as Moses is concerned, is humility; he does not perceive *chutzpah* as a positive element at all. If only Moses could lead an impudent and self-sufficient people, he could become the Messiah and lead the Jewish nation to the Land of Israel.

But Moses is unable to respond properly. Instead, he tries to suppress what he sees as a student rebellion. But student rebellion is a necessary part of life; school, after all, is hardly the ideal, but only a preparation for real life. In that gap between school and reality lies the source of the rebellion. To Moses, school is the ideal. Moses' response to the people is – you have food to eat (*manna*), a roof over your heads (the Cloud of Glory), and a meaningful 'curriculum,' what, then, is your problem?

If only Moses could have channeled the people's lust for meat into enthusiasm for conquering the land. But, alas, Moses was not capable of that.

In reality, however, the people's demands were premature, for they were not yet ready to complete their education. Miriam and Aaron's attempt to open the path to the Land of Israel for that entire generation was thus doomed to failure (see the commentaries below – §§ 10.8, 10.9, 16).

## § 8. PREPARATIONS FOR THE WILDERNESS JOURNEY

### § 8.1. THE MENORAH (8:1-4)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּהֶעֱלִיתָ  
אֶת־הַנִּזְוֹת אֶל־מוֹלֵד פְּנֵי הַמִּנְוָה יֵאִירוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנִּזְוֹת: ג וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן אַהֲרֹן  
אֶל־מוֹלֵד פְּנֵי הַמִּנְוָה הָעֵלְיָה נִרְתְּיָהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְיָ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה: ד וְזֶה  
מַעֲשֵׂה הַמִּנְרָה מִקִּשָׁה זָהָב עַד־יִרְכָּה עַד־פְּרֻחָהּ מִקִּשָׁה הִוא כַּמִּרְאֶה  
אֲשֶׁר הִרְאָה יְיָ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה בְּן עֹשֶׂה אֶת־הַמִּנְרָה:

(1) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**

(2) **Speak to Aaron and say to him, “When you mount the lamps, let the seven lamps give light at the front of the lampstand.”**

(3) **Aaron did so; he mounted the lamps at the front of the lampstand, as the Lord had commanded Moses. –**

(4) **Now this is how the lampstand was made: it was hammered work of gold, hammered from base to petal. According to the pattern that the Lord had shown Moses, so was the lampstand made.**

The focus of weekly portion *Behaalotecha*, “when you mount the lamps,” is problems of teaching and leadership. It begins by describing the lighting of the Menorah, which symbolizes an “awakening from below” that originates within the Jewish people themselves. Weekly portion *Behaalotecha* then goes on to address the right and wrong approaches to such an awakening.

**(2) Speak to Aaron and say to him:** God’s command that Aaron and his sons must light the Menorah has already been stated earlier in the Torah (Exod. 27:21). The laws governing the manner of the Menorah’s construction from a single slab of gold have also been covered (Exod. 25:31-40). The new element being introduced here is the connection between the lighting of the lamp and the overall theme of this book of Numbers; that is, with the preceding verse (Num. 7:89): “When Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, he would hear the Voice addressing him from above the cover that was on top of the Ark of the Pact between the two cherubim; thus He spoke to him.” Here, Aaron’s service is contrasted with that of Moses. Moses is associated with the Ark of the Covenant, and Aaron with the Menorah.

**When you mount the lamps:** The Torah here refers to the lighting of the lamps as “mounting” the lamps, a rather unusual expression. The Menorah does not function on its own; it must be “mounted,” or “raised.” This “awakening from below” is executed by Aaron.

There are two centers of holiness within the temple, the Ark and the Menorah. The Ark creates communication with God “from above, downward”: Revelation. The Almighty speaks and Moses perceives the message. This is the Written Torah.

In contrast, the Menorah creates communication with God “from below, upward”: the people’s awakening to the Torah and to holiness. This is the Oral Torah.

The Ark resides inside the Holy of Holies, behind a curtain, which symbolizes the Ark’s transcendence. The voice that emanates from it, i.e., the Written Torah, must be heeded, but that voice requires no human participation for improving or correcting it.

The Menorah, however, standing in the Temple’s main Sanctuary, requires active human participation – adding oil to it and kindling it. The Menorah – the Oral Torah – illuminates only by virtue of our own vigorous activity, and itself develops according to our participation. Through our actions we take part in its formation.

Moses, who is effectively cut off from the people, brings the light from Above downward. Aaron, on the other hand, remains in touch with the people – he feels their needs. For the Jewish people, Moses is the agent of Revelation, but Aaron – of holiness. It is therefore Aaron who

must kindle the Menorah, and the Oral Torah is actively realized by his doing so.

**Let the seven lamps give light at the front of the lampstand:** The Hebrew for “at the front of the lampstand” is *el mul penei ha-Menorah*, literally, “toward the face of the Menorah.”

In this somewhat ambiguous phrase, the “face” of the Menorah can be understood to mean either its central column (so the lamps on the six side branches all face the seventh, middle lamp), or the space in front of the Menorah (so both side branches and the central column face the Temple space in front of the Menorah). The Menorah should then illuminate both itself (the central trunk of the Menorah) and the path in a forward direction (the space in front of the Menorah).

Thus, the Written Torah, as symbolized by the Ark, speaks, while the Oral Torah – the Menorah – illuminates. Without this light, which illuminates both the Menorah itself (the wisdom inherent in the Jewish people) and the space of the Temple in front of it, movement within the Temple, i.e., advancement in holiness, would be impossible.

We can correctly implement God’s instructions, the voice of the Written Torah, only thanks to the illumination of the Temple, which the light of the Oral Torah creates. Without the light of the Oral Torah (the Menorah), the path to the Written Torah (the Ark) lies in darkness, and in seeking that path it is easy to lose one’s way.

**(3) Aaron did so ... as the Lord had commanded Moses:** Moses is the source of all prescriptions, including the relationship between the Oral and Written Torahs.

**(4) Now this is how the lampstand was made:** it was hammered work of gold, hammered from base to petal: This means that the Menorah had to be fashioned from a single slab of gold.

The Oral Torah is a single integral unit, not an assembly of disparate elements. If one tries to extract from it only isolated provisions, this will immediately create a wrong picture. Adopting that approach with the Written Torah – taking individual quotations from it and building one’s life upon them – is much more feasible (although this too can of course lead to distortions).

**According to the pattern that the Lord had shown Moses, so was the lampstand made:** The literal translation is: “So did he make

the lampstand.” The subject, “he,” is left unspecified – the Torah does not say who actually made it.

The Midrash explains that Moses struggled to envision the Menorah from its verbal description, and God therefore showed him its appearance graphically. But even then, Moses was unable to construct the Menorah, and it was made without his participation.

Moses’ connection is with the Written Torah. The concept of self-advancement, an essential aspect of the Oral Torah symbolized by ignition and ascent in the Menorah, is therefore problematic for him.

## § 8.2 CLEANSING THE LEVITES AND INITIATING THEM INTO THEIR SERVICE (8:5-26)

ה וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: וְקַח אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְטַהַרְתָּ אֹתָם: ז וְכַהֲתַעֲשֶׂה לָהֶם לְטַהַרְתָּם הַזֶּה עֲלֵיהֶם מִי חֲטָאתָ וְהֶעֱבִירוּ תַעֲרֵל עַל־כָּל־בְּשָׂרָם וְכַבְּסוּ בַגְדֵיהֶם וְהִטְהָרוּ: ח וְלָקַחוּ פָר בֶּן־בָּקָר וּמִנְחָתוֹ סֹלֶת בָּלוּלָה בַשֶּׁמֶן וּפְרִשְׁנֵי בֶן־בָּקָר תִּקַּח לְחֲטָאת: ט וְהִקְרַבְתָּ אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם לִפְנֵי אֱהֱל מוֹעֵד וְהִקְהַלְתָּ אֶת־כָּל־עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: י וְהִקְרַבְתָּ אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם לִפְנֵי יי וְסִמְכוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־יְדֵיהֶם עַל־הַלְוִיִּם: יא וְהִנְיֹחַ אֶהְרֹן אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם תְּנוּפָה לִפְנֵי יי מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיָה לְעֹבֵד אֶת־עַבְדְּתָ יי: יב וְהַלְוִיִּם יִסְמְכוּ אֶת־יְדֵיהֶם עַל רֹאשׁ הַפָּרִים וְעֲשֶׂה אֶת־הָאֱחָד חֲטָאתָ וְאֶת־הָאֱחָד עֹלָה לְיִי לְכַפֵּר עַל־הַלְוִיִּם: יג וְהֶעֱמַדְתָּ אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם לִפְנֵי אֶהְרֹן וּלִפְנֵי בְנָיו וְהִנַּפְתָּ אֹתָם תְּנוּפָה לְיִי: יד וְהִבַּדְלַתְתָּ אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיָה לִי הַלְוִיִּם: טו וְאֶחָד־כֹּן יָבֹאוּ הַלְוִיִּם לְעֹבֵד אֶת־אֱהֱל מוֹעֵד וְטַהַרְתָּ אֹתָם וְהִנַּפְתָּ אֹתָם תְּנוּפָה: טז כִּי נִתְּנִים נִתְּנִים הִמָּה לִי מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תַּחַת פְּטֹרֹת כָּל־רָחֹם בְּכוֹר כֹּל מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְקַחְתִּי אֹתָם לִי: יז כִּי לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֲדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה בְּיוֹם הַכֹּתִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּאַרְצָ מִצְרַיִם הַקֹּדֶשְׁתִּי אֹתָם לִי: יח וְאֶקַּח אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם תַּחַת כָּל־בְּכוֹר בְּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: יט וְאֶתְּנָה אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם נִתְּנִים | לְאֶהְרֹן וּלְבָנָיו מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעֹבֵד אֶת־עַבְדְּתָ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֱהֱל מוֹעֵד וּלְכַפֵּר עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא יִהְיֶה בְּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְגֹף בְּגִשְׁתָּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ: כ וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה וְאֶהְרֹן וְכָל־עֵדֶת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְלוּיִם כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יי אֶת־מֹשֶׁה לְלוּיִם כְּ־עָשׂוֹ לָהֶם

בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: כֹּא וַיִּתְחַטְּאוּ הַלְוִיִּם וַיִּכְבְּסוּ בְּגָדֵיהֶם וַיִּנָּף אֹהֶל־וָאֹתָם  
 תְּנִיפָה לִפְנֵי יְיָ וַיִּכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיהֶם אֹהֶל־וָאֹתָם לְטַהֲרָם: כִּב וַאֲחֵרֵי־כֵן בָּאוּ הַלְוִיִּם  
 לְעֵבֶד אֶת־עַבְדְּתֶם בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לִפְנֵי אֹהֶל־וָאֹתָם וּלְפָנַי בְּנִי בְּאֶשֶׁר צִוֵּה יְיָ  
 אֶת־מִשָּׁה עַל־הַלְוִיִּם בְּן עֶשְׂו לָהֶם:

(5) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**

(6) **Take the Levites from among the Israelites and cleanse them.**

(7) **This is what you shall do to them to cleanse them: sprinkle on them water of purification, and let them go over their whole body with a razor, and wash their clothes; thus they shall be cleansed.**

(8) **Let them take a bull of the herd, and with it a meal offering of choice flour with oil mixed in, and you take a second bull of the herd for a sin offering.**

(9) **You shall bring the Levites forward before the Tent of Meeting. Assemble the whole Israelite community,**

(10) **and bring the Levites forward before the Lord. Let the Israelites lay their hands upon the Levites,**

(11) **and let Aaron designate the Levites before the Lord as an elevation offering from the Israelites, that they may perform the service of the Lord.**

(12) **The Levites shall now lay their hands upon the heads of the bulls; one shall be offered to the Lord as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering, to make expiation for the Levites.**

(13) **You shall place the Levites in attendance upon Aaron and his sons, and designate them as an elevation offering to the Lord.**

(14) **Thus you shall set the Levites apart from the Israelites, and the Levites shall be Mine.**

(15) **Thereafter the Levites shall be qualified for the service of the Tent of Meeting, once you have cleansed them and designated them as an elevation offering.**

(16) For they are formally assigned to Me from among the Israelites: I have taken them for Myself in place of all the first issue of the womb, of all the first-born of the Israelites.

(17) For every first-born among the Israelites, man as well as beast, is Mine; I consecrated them to Myself at the time that I smote every first-born in the land of Egypt.

(18) Now I take the Levites instead of every first-born of the Israelites;

(19) and from among the Israelites I formally assign the Levites to Aaron and his sons, to perform the service for the Israelites in the Tent of Meeting and to make expiation for the Israelites, so that no plague may afflict the Israelites for coming too near the sanctuary.

(20) Moses, Aaron, and the whole Israelite community did with the Levites accordingly; just as the Lord had commanded Moses in regard to the Levites, so the Israelites did with them.

(21) The Levites purified themselves and washed their clothes; and Aaron designated them as an elevation offering before the Lord, and Aaron made expiation for them to cleanse them.

(22) Thereafter the Levites were qualified to perform their service in the Tent of Meeting, under Aaron and his sons. As the Lord had commanded Moses in regard to the Levites, so they did to them.

(23) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

(24) This is the rule for the Levites. From twenty-five years of age up they shall participate in the work force in the service of the Tent of Meeting;

(25) but at the age of fifty they shall retire from the work force and shall serve no more.

(26) They may assist their brother Levites at the Tent of Meeting by standing guard, but they shall perform no labor. Thus you shall deal with the Levites in regard to their duties.

(6) **Take the Levites:** The Levites were singled out for service even earlier, but only here do they actually assume that role.

**From among the Israelites:** The Levites serve in the Temple as representatives of the entire nation.

**And cleanse them:** For the Levites, the central concept is *tohorah*, “purity,” in contrast to the *kohanim*, for whom the central concept is *kedushah*, “holiness.” It follows directly that the priests are “sanctified,” but the Levites are “cleansed.” Accordingly, the camp of the priests, the site of the Temple itself, is the “camp of holiness,” while the camp of the Levites is the “camp of purity.”

*Kadosh*, “holy,” and *tahor*, “pure,” are completely different concepts. *Kadosh* is the opposite of *chol*, “profane, secular,” while *tahor* is the opposite of *tame’*, “impure” (or “unclean,” in the ritual sense). These respective distinctions are quite different in their character.

When something is holy, this means that the thing (a person, place, time, or event) has been removed from its ordinary, everyday context, and is now singled out – dedicated – for the purpose of communicating with God. Ordinary, everyday existence is not the opposite of holiness; rather, it serves as a basis, a foundation, for holiness.

“Pure” and “impure” are opposite concepts, both associated with everything that is ordinary and unremarkable. A life that is ordinary but pure can serve as a basis for holiness, and can be directed toward holiness. But an ordinary, *impure* life can never serve as a basis for holiness. Purity can receive holiness; impurity cannot. In summary: purity is not holiness, but it is a precondition for holiness.

The priests live their lives so close to the Temple that they are cut off from everyday life. (One of the best indicators of this is that priests are strictly prohibited from coming into contact with the dead.) For the general population, the priests are the conduit through whom holiness comes to them from Above.

The Levites, on the other hand, are much closer to the reality of this world. Their task is to cleanse the real world, both as individuals and society as a whole, from impurity, making it possible for the *kohanim* to bring holiness to the people. The purity of the Levites is elaborated in the book of Numbers, since it is the Levites who are the protagonists

of this book, whereas holiness is covered in Leviticus,<sup>24</sup> the book that details the laws to be followed by the *kohanim*.

**(7) This is what you shall do to them to cleanse them ... and let them go over their whole body with a razor:** This parallels the procedure for cleansing the leper (Lev. 14:8). Because the Levites will soon be called upon to purify all the children of Israel, first they must themselves be cleansed from every type of impurity.

**And wash their clothes:** This expression means immersion in the waters of a *mikveh* (see Gen. 35:2, Exod. 19:10), a necessary element of cleansing from any form of impurity. The waters of the *mikveh* symbolize uniting the person who immerses in them with the fundamental essence of the universe. The purification that results is based on that principle. Their clothes also have to be purified.

**(9) You shall bring the Levites forward before the Tent of Meeting:** The verb *hakrev*, “to bring near,” also means “to bring a sacrifice.” In receiving their status of special closeness to God, the Levites also forfeit their right to own land, the foundation of a normal life. Thus, the Levites in this sense “sacrifice themselves.”

**(10) Let the Israelites lay their hands upon the Levites:** Laying hands is an important feature of bringing a sacrifice in the Temple (Lev. 1:4). The Levites are, as it were, an atoning sacrifice for the entire nation.

**(12) The Levites shall now lay their hands upon the heads of the bulls:** The essence of the sacrifice is shifted from the Levites to the bulls.

**(13) You shall place the Levites in attendance upon Aaron and his sons, and designate them as an elevation offering to the Lord:** The Levites must acknowledge their subservience to the *kohanim*, and submit to them.

**(14) And you will single out the Levites from among the children of Israel, and the Levites will become Mine:** The Levites are no longer “just ordinary people,” for they now “belong to God.”

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<sup>24</sup> As already mentioned, the original Hebrew name of the third book of the Torah is *torat kohanim*, “The Priestly Law.” The change from *kohanim* to Levites in the name was introduced only when the name of the book was translated from Hebrew to Greek and Latin.

**(19) And to make expiation for the Israelites, so that no plague may afflict the Israelites for coming too near the sanctuary:** Because the Jewish nation bears the guilt of having worshiped the golden calf, they are enjoined from approaching the sanctuary.

**(24) From twenty-five years of age up they shall participate in the work force in the service:** The Levites' actual service begins at the age of thirty, but they begin their practical training at the age of twenty-five.

**(25-26) At the age of fifty they shall retire from the work force and shall serve no more ... They may assist their brother Levites ... by standing guard:** After that retirement their activities still include keeping order in the Temple – supervising the work of the younger Levites, and later, in the permanent Temple in Jerusalem, also the opening and closing of the gates.

### § 8.3. CELEBRATING PASSOVER ONE YEAR AFTER THE EXODUS (9:1-5)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר־סִינַי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִיית לְצֵאתָם מִמִּצְרַיִם  
 מִצְרַיִם בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן לֵאמֹר: בּוֹעֲשׂוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַפֶּסַח  
 בְּמוֹעֲדוֹ: ג בְּאַרְבַּעַה עָשָׂר־יוֹם בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה בֵּין הָעֲרֵבִים תַּעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ  
 בְּמֹעֵדוֹ כְּכֹל־חֻקֹּתָיו וְכֹל־מִשְׁפָּטָיו תַּעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ: ד וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־בְּנֵי  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת הַפֶּסַח: ה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ אֶת־הַפֶּסַח בְּרִאשׁוֹן בְּאַרְבַּעַה עָשָׂר  
 יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ בֵּין הָעֲרֵבִים בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְיָ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה כִּן  
 עָשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

(1) **The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, on the first new moon of the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, saying:**

(2) **Let the Israelite people offer the passover sacrifice at its set time:**

(3) **you shall offer it on the fourteenth day of this month, at twilight, at its set time; you shall offer it in accordance with all its rules and rites.**

(4) **Moses instructed the Israelites to offer the passover sacrifice;**

(5) **and they offered the passover sacrifice in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, in the wilderness of Sinai. Just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so the Israelites did.**

**(1) On the first new moon of the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt:** This happened one month earlier than the census of weekly portion Bemidbar, with which this book of Numbers begins (“On the first day of the second month,” see Num. 1:1).

**(2) Let the Israelite people offer the passover sacrifice at its set time:** Passover represents the onset of the journey to the Land of Israel. The original plan was for the Jews to arrive there within a year of the Exodus, but the incident of the golden calf has now caused a delay. And so, with that now behind them, the people begin their journey anew, and celebrate Passover again.

§ 8.4. A SUPPLEMENTAL PASSOVER FOR THOSE WHO WERE IMPURE AT THE FIRST (9:6-14)

וַיְהִי אֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ טְמֵאִים לְנֶפֶשׁ אָדָם וְלֹא־יָכְלוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת־הַפֶּסַח בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיִּקְרְבוּ לְפָנָי מֹשֶׁה וְלִפְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הֵהֱמָה אֵלָיו אֲנַחְנוּ טְמֵאִים לְנֶפֶשׁ אָדָם לָמָּה נִגְרַע לְבַלְתִּי הַקָּרִיב אֶת־קִרְבָּן יְיָ בְּמַעֲדוֹ בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מֹשֶׁה עֲמְדוּ וְאַשְׁמְעָה מִה־יִצְוֶה יְיָ לָכֶם:

ט וַיַּדְבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי־יִהְיֶה־טָמֵא | לְנֶפֶשׁ אוֹ בְּדַרְדָּר רַחֲקָה לָכֶם אוֹ לְדַרְתֵּיכֶם וְעָשָׂה פֶסַח לָיִ: יא בַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁנִי בְּאַרְבַּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם בֵּין הָעֲרֵבִים יַעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ עַל־מִצּוֹת וּמִזְרֵיִם יֹאכְלֵהוּ: יב לֹא־יִשְׂאִירוּ מִמֶּנּוּ עַד־בֹּקֶר וְעֵצֶם לֹא יִשְׁבְּרוּבוּ כְּכַל־חֻקַּת הַפֶּסַח יַעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ: יג וְהָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־הוּא טָהוֹר וּבְדַרְדָּר לֹא־יִהְיֶה וְחָדַל לַעֲשׂוֹת הַפֶּסַח וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מֵעַמִּיָּה כִּי | קִרְבָּן יְיָ לֹא הַקָּרִיב בְּמַעֲדוֹ חָטְאוֹ יִשָּׂא הָאִישׁ הַהוּא: יד וְכִי־יִגֹּר אֹתְכֶם גֵּר וְעָשָׂה פֶסַח לָיִ כַּחֲקַת הַפֶּסַח וּכְמִשְׁפָּטוֹ כֵּן יַעֲשֶׂה חֻקָּה אַחַת יִהְיֶה לָכֶם וְלַגֵּר וְלַאֲזֵרַח הָאָרֶץ:

(6) **But there were some men who were unclean by reason of a corpse and could not offer the passover sacrifice on that day. Appearing that same day before Moses and Aaron,**

(7) **those men said to them, “Unclean though we are by reason of a corpse, why must we be debarred from presenting the Lord’s offering at its set time with the rest of the Israelites?”**

(8) **Moses said to them, “Stand by, and let me hear what instructions the Lord gives about you.”**

(9) **And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**

(10) **Speak to the Israelite people, saying: When any of you or of your posterity who are defiled by a corpse or are on a long journey would offer a passover sacrifice to the Lord,**

(11) **they shall offer it in the second month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs,**

(12) **and they shall not leave any of it over until morning. They shall not break a bone of it. They shall offer it in strict accord with the law of the passover sacrifice.**

(13) **But if a man who is clean and not on a journey refrains from offering the passover sacrifice, that person shall be cut off from his kin, for he did not present the Lord’s offering at its set time; that man shall bear his guilt.**

(14) **And when a stranger who resides with you would offer a passover sacrifice to the Lord, he must offer it in accordance with the rules and rites of the passover sacrifice. There shall be one law for you, whether stranger or citizen of the country.**

**(6) But there were some men who were unclean by reason of a corpse and could not offer the passover sacrifice on that day:** A person who is defiled by coming in contact with the dead is barred from entering the Temple (Num. 5:2) and from eating any part of a sacrifice.

In Egypt, immediately prior to the Exodus itself, when the Passover sacrifice was offered for the first time, impurity through defilement to the dead was not yet an issue. Only now, after the Levites, who are the

focus of national purity, have been singled out for their special status among the Jewish people, does the principle of purification become an issue for everyone else as well. The problem of impurity resulting in an inability to offer the Passover sacrifice now arises.

**Appearing that same day:** They demonstrate initiative. This first “awakening from below” – the Jewish people’s desire to correctly realize Divine ideals even when there is no explicit Divine instruction – is the root of Jewish chutzpah.

**To Moses and Aaron:** The general commandment to observe Passover in the wilderness was transmitted to the people through Moses (Num. 9:1). But when a problem arises, the people approach both Moses and Aaron jointly. Moses brings revelation “from Above, downward.” But for a correct understanding of the people’s problems, for realizing their “awakening from below,” they need Aaron as well.

**(7) Those men said to them ... why must we be debarred from presenting the Lord’s offering at its set time with the rest of the Israelites?:** Passover is the moment of birth of the Jewish people. One who does not observe Passover is excluded, as it were, from membership in the nation of Israel.

**(8) Moses said to them, “Stand by, and let me hear what instructions the Lord gives about you”:** This is the very first time that Moses is at a loss to respond to some question of Torah law. Here a new facet of the law is born in the process of God’s dialogue with the Jewish people, and as a response to the initiative taken by members of the Jewish nation.

Because no Jew had ever before expressed an aspiration to reclaim a lost opportunity to observe Passover, the law of a supplemental Passover had not been given to them. Revelation requires that people themselves step forward to demand it. New opportunities open up from Above only after we demand that they appear.

**(10) Would offer a passover sacrifice to the Lord:** The “awakening from below” is granted, thus establishing the existence of two complementary aspects of the Torah: the giving of the Torah in its initial, static form, and the giving of the Torah as a process of ongoing development. The first of those comes solely from above, while the

latter occurs as “a response from Above to initiative expressed from below.”

Moses’ approach to Revelation is the “from Above, downward” approach. But here the problem is directed “from below, upward,” which is why Moses is at a loss to answer. The idea that the Torah could develop at the people’s initiative is highly problematic for Moses, and the people therefore approach Moses and Aaron together. Only then is it possible to ask God to revisit the commandment.

**(11) In the second month, on the fourteenth day of the month:** This is the fourteenth of Iyar, exactly one month after the main Passover. This additional day for bringing the Passover sacrifice is called *Pesach Sheini*, “Supplemental Passover” (literally, “second Passover”). It is a new festival instituted here at the initiative of the Jews themselves.

**They shall offer it in strict accord with the law of the passover sacrifice:** The laws of this “supplemental Passover” are somewhat different from those of the main Passover, in that the laws apply only to the sacrifice, and not to the day itself.

Thus, there is no general prohibition against having *chametz*, “leaven” in the house on this day. The *chametz* prohibition applies only to the Passover sacrifice, that is, while it is actually being eaten. Moreover, this day is not a “sacred occasion” like the main Passover and other major Jewish festivals (see Lev. 23). All forms of work and constructive activity are permitted on *Pesach Sheini*.

**(13) But if a man who is clean and not on a journey:** Jewish perseverance created this additional Passover opportunity, which may be used, however, only when absolutely necessary – when a person could not observe the main Passover.

**Refrains from offering the passover sacrifice, that person shall be cut off from his kin:** A Jew who could have observed Passover but intentionally refrained from doing so has severed his ties with the national destiny, and is thus cut off from the people of Israel.

**(14) There shall be one law for you, whether stranger or citizen of the country:** Here, the Hebrew word for “stranger” is *ger*, which in the classical Jewish Tradition means, simply, a convert to Judaism.

By celebrating Passover, which commemorates and reenacts the process of the birth of the Jewish people, the newcomers integrate

with the Jews who are Jews by birth, and they all then share a common national foundation.

The idea of “recouping a lost Passover opportunity” is quite unusual. No such mechanism exists for reclaiming any other commandment that was not observed in its proper time.

If, for example, a Jew did not hear the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, there is no provision for a “make-up event” one month later. And so with all the other holidays. An exception is made only for Pesach – because it is associated with the very origins of the nation’s existence. If one fails to connect with his people at their root, all other commandments have lost their meaning. And that is why only Passover comes with a built-in second-chance opportunity.

This point serves to clarify the relationship between the Torah and the people of Israel. National holiness is the starting point for all other holiness in the Torah. No person can possibly have a Torah unless he or she first unites with the Jewish people.

#### § 8.5. “AWAKENING FROM BELOW” AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE TORAH

The Torah establishes that *Pesach Sheini* should be observed in the second month of the Jewish year, Iyar. In the first month, in Nisan, deliverance comes from Above: God leads the people out of Egypt, and all they do is follow orders.

But in the second month, Iyar, the situation is different: there is an “awakening from below,” when the people take initiative; their demand for an additional Passover is a manifestation of such independence. Nisan is the month of deliverance, but only under submission, which is an essential shortcoming in the idea of the Exodus. Iyar, a month of self-assertive deliverance, corrects this deficiency.

Therefore, on the main Passover, in Nisan, one must not eat (or even own) *chametz* for the entire holiday. Matzah is a symbol of subordination. (I use no food products of my own “fermentation” – i.e., I have no ideas of my own, I do only what I am told.) But on *Pesach Sheini*, observed in Iyar, there is no requirement to distance oneself

from *chametz*, except at the actual moment when the sacrifice is being eaten.

*Pesach Sheini*, initiated by the Jews themselves, is the archetype of a festival that emerged at the Jews' own initiative. It is no coincidence that in our times Israel's Independence Day and *Yom Yerushalayim* likewise both fall in the month of Iyar. (*Yom Yerushalayim*, "Jerusalem Day" is Israel's national holiday commemorating the reunification of Jerusalem and establishing Israeli control over the Old City in the aftermath of the June 1967 Six-Day War.)

The idea of *Pesach Sheini*, "Supplemental Passover," is that if something given to you from Above does not suit your needs, then you may challenge God by asking for something else. This is a manifestation of the *chutzpah* that is an integral part of Judaism and, in fact, an important quality of the Jewish people.

We must of course accept the decisions handed down to us from Above. But this does not mean that we must accept God's decisions uncritically and unquestioningly. Divine orders are meant to be not just blindly carried out, but deliberated and debated. Such discussion often leads even to amendment of those orders. Proper development of religion can happen only as the result of this type of interaction – a *collaboratio*<sup>25</sup>

New Divine revelation occurs only as a response to the demands of the people. This requirement fosters independence of thought among the people and goads them to action. It teaches them to ponder how the commandments should be implemented, and, if necessary, even to demand an amendment. The religious independence of the people has been an inherent feature of Judaism from the earliest days of its inception.

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<sup>25</sup> Further instances of this principle can be found in Abraham's dispute with God, Jacob's struggle with the angel, the incident of the breaking of the Tablets of the Law, and the second tablets as written jointly by God and man, among others.

### § 8.6. SUSPENSION OF PASSOVER OBSERVANCE IN THE WILDERNESS FOR THIRTY-NINE YEARS

The book of Joshua informs us that the Passover that the Israelites observed one year after the Exodus, the one that the Torah describes here, was the only such Passover observed during the entire forty years in the wilderness. For the next thirty-nine years the Israelites did not practice circumcision and did not celebrate Pesach:

“At that time the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Make flint knives and proceed with a second circumcision of the Israelites.’ ... This is the reason why Joshua had the circumcision performed: All ... the people who came out of Egypt had been circumcised, [but] none of the people born after the exodus, during the wilderness wanderings, had been circumcised. ... For they were uncircumcised, not having been circumcised on the way. ... Encamped at Gilgal, in the steppes of Jericho, the Israelites offered the passover sacrifice on the fourteenth day of the month, toward evening” (Josh. 5:2-7).

However, no reason is given for the fact that no newborns were circumcised for thirty-nine of the forty years of the wilderness journey (the repetition of *ba-derekh*, “on the way,” might suggest that the reason had something to do with the dangers of travelling for persons having just undergone circumcision; see the *Bible Dynamics* commentary on Exod. 4:24). And this meant that neither could they celebrate Passover during all that time, for only the circumcised are allowed to partake of the Passover sacrifice.<sup>26</sup> (On the possible reason why couldn’t the older generation, at least, who were already circumcised, celebrate Passover during the years in the wilderness, see the discussion of Manitou’s ideas about Moses’ perception of the Abrahamic covenant between God and the Patriarchs and the Sinai covenant between God and the nation of Israel that left Egypt in the *Bible Dynamics* commentary on Exod. 4:24.)

Those two commandments – circumcision and Passover – both hark back to the birth of the Jewish nation, and lie at the very foundation

<sup>26</sup> This grouping of of commandments itself is very unusual. An uncircumcised Jew can fulfill all other command-ments (*shabbat*, *tefillin*, etc.), but he may not partake of the Passover sacrifice. Note that this restriction does not apply to the modern observance of the Passover seder, but only to the Passover sacrifice during Temple times.

of Jewish tradition. Circumcision originates from Abraham, the proto-ancestor of the Jewish people. And Passover originated with the Exodus from Egypt, the actual birth of the Jewish nation.

Moreover, both of those stages in the birth of the Jewish people are very closely associated with the Land of Israel.

God told Abraham: “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). And this was repeated at the covenant of circumcision: “I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. ... As for you ... keep My covenant ... between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised” (Gen. 17:8-10).

At the moment of the Exodus there is also a focus on the land: “Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am the Lord. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians ... I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I the Lord” (Exod. 6:6-8).

The critical importance of the Land of Israel in the life of the Jewish people is that the mission of the Jewish people can only be realized in the Holy Land. That mission is the very essence of the nation and the foundation of the Jewish people’s life.

Even when the Jewish people are in exile, but are anticipating an opportunity to return to their land at any moment, circumcision retains its meaning. But when an entire generation is fundamentally cut off from the Land of Israel, then it is cut off from its mission and from the meaning of its existence. Effectively, Judaism and Jewry are frozen, as it were, in a state of suspended animation.

The generation of the Exodus was condemned to wander in the wilderness for forty years, and ultimately to perish there, because in the incident of the spies they rejected the Land of Israel. And with that they also gave up circumcising their newborns and celebrating Passover. The Almighty does not accept the Passover sacrifice, which is a symbol of liberation, from those who refuse to conquer and possess the Land of Israel.

Only when that generation had passed on, and their children and grandchildren, with Joshua as their new leader, entered into the Land of Israel, their mission and their connection with the land were

reestablished, and observance of circumcision and Passover could then be restored.

Thus, in the course of the Exodus, the actual journey began not just once but three times, in three different senses, corresponding to three celebrations of Passover.

The first of those was the true beginning of the journey, the first Passover. That movement began during the sojourn in Egypt, but was suspended by the incident of the golden calf.

The second onset of the journey is here in the Book of Numbers. We might call it the “second take” of the Exodus, when the Israelites took up the journey anew. But soon came yet another interruption, the incident of the spies.

The third onset of the journey occurs at the end of the forty years of wanderings, and after Moses’ death, when Joshua has just become the leader of the nation. Joshua circumcises everyone and reinstitutes the observance of Passover. He even “reprises” the Exodus, with the crossing of the Jordan mirroring the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. Joshua and the people then go on to conquer and possess the Land.

### § 8.7. THE CLOUD HOVERING OVER THE TABERNACLE

(9:15-23)

טו וּבִזְמַן הַקִּיָּם אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן כַּסֶּה הָעֲנַן אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן לְאַהֲלֵי הָעֵדֻת  
 וּבְעֶרְבֵי יְהִיָּה עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן כְּמִרְאֵה־אֵשׁ עַד־בֹּקֶר: טז בֵּן יִהְיֶה תָמִיד  
 הָעֲנַן יִכְסֶּנּוּ וּמִרְאֵה־אֵשׁ לַיְלָה: יז וּלְפִי הָעֲלוֹת הָעֲנַן מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל  
 וְאַחֲרֵי כֵן יִסְעוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבַמִּקּוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכְּנוּ שֵׁם הָעֲנַן שָׁם יִחַנּוּ  
 בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: יח עַל־פִּי יִי יִסְעוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל־פִּי יִי יִחַנּוּ כְּלַיְמֵי אֲשֶׁר  
 יִשְׁכְּנוּ הָעֲנַן עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן יִחַנּוּ: יט וּבַהֲאָרֶץ הָעֲנַן עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן יָמִים  
 רַבִּים וְשָׁמְרוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מִשְׁמֶרֶת יִי וְלֹא יִסְעוּ: כ וְאֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה  
 הָעֲנַן יָמִים מִסְפָּר עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן עַל־פִּי יִי יִחַנּוּ וְעַל־פִּי יִי יִסְעוּ: כא וְאֵשׁ  
 אֲשֶׁר־יִהְיֶה הָעֲנַן מֵעֶרֶב עַד־בֹּקֶר וְנִעְלָה הָעֲנַן בַּבֹּקֶר וְנִסְעוּ אִזּוֹ יוֹמָם  
 וְלַיְלָה וְנִעְלָה הָעֲנַן וְנִסְעוּ: כב אִז־יָמִים אִז־תִּדְּשׁ אִז־יָמִים בַּהֲאָרֶץ  
 הָעֲנַן עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן לִשְׁכֹּן עִלָּיו יִחַנּוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא יִסְעוּ וּבַהֲעֲלֹתוֹ  
 יִסְעוּ: כג עַל־פִּי יִי יִחַנּוּ וְעַל־פִּי יִי יִסְעוּ אֶת־מִשְׁמֶרֶת יִי שְׁמְרוּ עַל־פִּי  
 יִי בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה:

**(15) On the day that the Tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle, the Tent of the Pact; and in the evening it rested over the Tabernacle in the likeness of fire until morning.**

**(16) It was always so: the cloud covered it, appearing as fire by night.**

**(17) And whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly; and at the spot where the cloud settled, there the Israelites would make camp.**

**(18) At a command of the Lord the Israelites broke camp, and at a command of the Lord they made camp: they remained encamped as long as the cloud stayed over the Tabernacle.**

**(19) When the cloud lingered over the Tabernacle many days, the Israelites observed the Lord's mandate and did not journey on.**

**(20) At such times as the cloud rested over the Tabernacle for but a few days, they remained encamped at a command of the Lord, and broke camp at a command of the Lord.**

**(21) And at such times as the cloud stayed from evening until morning, they broke camp as soon as the cloud lifted in the morning. Day or night, whenever the cloud lifted, they would break camp.**

**(22) Whether it was two days or a month or a year – however long the cloud lingered over the Tabernacle – the Israelites remained encamped and did not set out; only when it lifted did they break camp.**

**(23) On a sign from the Lord they made camp and on a sign from the Lord they broke camp; they observed the Lord's mandate at the Lord's bidding through Moses.**

**(15) On the day that the Tabernacle was set up:** With these verses, the Torah returns us to the day of the completion and installation of the Tabernacle, the first day of Nisan, two weeks short of the first anniversary of the Exodus.

**The cloud covered the Tabernacle, the Tent of the Pact:** The purpose of the Tabernacle is to serve as a resting place for the Tablets, which give testimony to the giving of the Torah. The cloud and fire over the Tabernacle derive from the cloud and fire that appeared on Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:15). In other words, the Tabernacle is a Mount Sinai in miniature, a mobile version of it that accompanies the Jewish people wherever they go.

Here, as at Mount Sinai, the combination of cloud and fire symbolizes the Torah's juxtaposition of the attribute of *chesed*, "mercy" (water vapor) with the attribute of *din*, "judgment" (fire).

Water gives and restores life, thus representing the quality of mercy, while fire destroys and divides, symbolizing the attribute of judgment. For the Shekhinah to be present, both a manifestation of mercy and a manifestation of judgment are necessary.

**(16) The cloud covered it, appearing as fire by night:** The very same cloud of the daytime became a "cloud" of fire at night. In this way it differed from the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud that led the Jews out of Egypt (Exod. 13:19). Those pillars were two distinct things, but here the night and day manifestations of the cloud are just two different forms of one and the same entity.

At the beginning of the journey, at the time of the Exodus, it seems that the two pillars – of fire and of cloud, at night and by day – represented two entirely different situations. Being fiery and being cloudy are hardly one and the same thing. There is a visible, comprehensible world, and there is a dark, impenetrable world. Such was the perception of the people at the onset of the Exodus.

But as the people built the Tabernacle, they came to an understanding of monotheism as their most fundamental new concept, of which one aspect is the understanding that all the world's phenomena derive from a single source. Monotheism is thus a truly complex religious idea, because it claims that both good and bad have a common source, that both come from God. Human understanding is in general far more amenable to a dualistic conception of the world, that "good comes from God, and evil from the devil."

When the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire were united in a single cloud, this advanced the Jewish nation to a uniquely Jewish understanding of the unity of God.

**(16) It was always so: the cloud covered it:** All the verbs in this passage are expressed in the “continuous tense.” (This verbal form in modern Hebrew always indicates the future tense, but in the grammar of biblical Hebrew it can also be understood as a prolonged or repeated action, even if it occurred in the past.) Thus, here the Torah lays out the principles upon which the Jews’ journey through the wilderness will be based, irrespective of how long that journey will last.

**(17, 23) And whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly; and at the spot where the cloud settled, there the Israelites would make camp.... at the Lord’s bidding through Moses:** The Midrash describes it as follows. When it was time to set off, the cloud inclined toward the direction where the Almighty wished the people to go. As the people prepared to embark, the trumpets were sounded, but the cloud did not move from its place until “Moses would say: Advance, O Lord! May Your enemies be scattered, and may Your foes flee before You!” (Num. 10:35).

Only then the Ark and the cloud would begin to move. And when the cloud stopped, showing the children of Israel the place where they were to camp, the cloud would not descend upon the Tabernacle until Moses said: “Return, O Lord, you who are Israel’s myriads of thousands!” (Num. 10:36).

**(18) As long as the cloud stayed over the Tabernacle:** “Stayed” here in the Hebrew is *yishkon*, from the verbal root *Sh-Kh-N*, “to dwell, rest, hover.” The word *mishkan*, “Tabernacle,” also derives from the same root, as does *Shekhinah*, “the Divine Presence.” Thus, the cloud is an actual component, as it were, of the Tabernacle – the part that guides, showing the way. Those two together, the Tabernacle and the cloud, are the visible indicator of God’s presence in the camp of Israel.

**(23) On a sign from the Lord they made camp and on a sign from the Lord they broke camp; they observed the Lord’s mandate:** As the people had not yet advanced to a fully self-sufficient and independent life, they were still in a state of complete submission.

## § 8.8. THE SILVER TRUMPETS (10:1-10)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב עֲשֵׂה לָךְ שְׁתֵּי חֲצוּצֹת כֶּסֶף מִקְשָׁה תַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם וְהָיוּ לָךְ לְמִקְרָא הָעֵדָה וּלְמִסְעָ אֶת־הַמַּחֲנֹת: ג וְתִקְעוּ בָהֶן וְנוֹעְדוּ אֵלָיִךְ כָּל־הָעֵדָה אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: ד וְאִם־בָּאֲחַת יִתְקַעוּ וְנוֹעְדוּ אֵלָיִךְ הַנְּשִׂאִים רְאֵשֵׁי אֲלֵפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ה וְתִקְעֶתֶם תְּרוּעָה וְנִסְעוּ הַמַּחֲנֹת הַחֲנִים קִדְמָה: ו וְתִקְעֶתֶם תְּרוּעָה שְׁנִית וְנִסְעוּ הַמַּחֲנֹת הַחֲנִים תִּימְנָה תְּרוּעָה יִתְקַעוּ לְמִסְעֵיהֶם: ז וּבִהְקֵהִיל אֶת־הַקָּהֵל תִּתְקַעוּ וְלֹא תִרְיעוּ: ח וּבְגִי אֶהְרֹן הַכֹּהֲנִים יִתְקַעוּ בַחֲצוּצֹת וְהָיוּ לָכֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם: ט וְכִי־תִבְאוּ מִלְחָמָה בְּאַרְצְכֶם עַל־הַצַּר הַצָּרֵר אֲתֹכֶם וְהִרְעֵתֶם בַּחֲצוּצֹת וְנִזְכַּרְתֶּם לְפָנַי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְנוֹשַׁעְתֶּם מֵאִיְבֵיכֶם: י וּבְיוֹם שִׁמְחַתְכֶם וּבְמוֹעֲדֵיכֶם וּבְרֵאשֵׁי חֲדָשֵׁיכֶם וְתִקְעֶתֶם בַּחֲצוּצֹת עַל עֲלֵתֵיכֶם וְעַל זִבְחֵי שְׁלָמֵיכֶם וְהָיוּ לָכֶם לְזִכָּרוֹן לְפָנַי אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אָנִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

(1) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

(2) Have two silver trumpets made; make them of hammered work. They shall serve you to summon the community and to set the divisions in motion.

(3) When both are blown in long blasts, the whole community shall assemble before you at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting;

(4) and if only one is blown, the chieftains, heads of Israel's contingents, shall assemble before you.

(5) But when you sound short blasts, the divisions encamped on the east shall move forward;

(6) and when you sound short blasts a second time, those encamped on the south shall move forward. Thus short blasts shall be blown for setting them in motion,

(7) while to convoke the congregation you shall blow long blasts, not short ones.

(8) The trumpets shall be blown by Aaron's sons, the priests; they shall be for you an institution for all time throughout the ages.

(9) **When you are at war in your land against an aggressor who attacks you, you shall sound short blasts on the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the Lord your God and be delivered from your enemies.**

(10) **And on your joyous occasions – your fixed festivals and new moon days – you shall sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being. They shall be a reminder of you before your God: I, the Lord, am your God.**

(2) **Have two silver trumpets made:** We noted earlier (see § 7.1) that the silver trumpets are man-made instruments, corresponding not to natural, everyday life but to wilderness life and all that was miraculous in the Exodus from Egypt. This distinguishes the silver trumpets from the shofar that the Messiah will blow (Isa. 27:13). The Shofar is a natural instrument made from a ram's horn. The future, Messianic redemption is associated with natural, ordinary life in the Land of Israel, where the Jewish people advance naturally to the Messianic era.

**They shall serve you to summon the community and to set the divisions in motion:** Thus, there were three indicators that the people followed in order to know when they should start moving: the rise of the cloud, the trumpet blasts, and Moses' recitation.

The first of those three, the rise of the cloud, was an action brought about by God, an action "from Above, downward" that initiated the next transition.

The second indicator, the sounding of the trumpets, is the result of Jewish internal, social organization. The people hear and respond to the Divine appeal. This all happens below, in the earthly domain.

The third and final indicator that movement should begin is Moses' words addressed to the Ark. This is an appeal "from below, upward," which can be realized only after the preceding two events have occurred – directions received from God, and Jewish self-organization.

And only after that appeal "from below, upward" can the movement previously described actually commence. These three sequential actions together create a model for the Jewish people's ongoing relationship

with God throughout their entire history. It is a model in which there is not merely submission, but, rather, a complex interaction of both sides.

**Make them of hammered work:** Each trumpet had to be hammered from a single piece of silver. This integrity of construction emphasizes that the purpose of the trumpets is to gather all of Israel together as a single assembly. In other words, this requirement underscores the unity of the Jewish people at all levels.

**Have two silver trumpets made:** The Hebrew here is actually quite different: *Aseh lecha*, “Make for yourself” (two silver trumpets).

The word *lecha*, “for yourself,” is unusual for a command in which God is instructing Moses to create something for the entire nation.

The Midrash therefore interprets this as “do it for yourself,” i.e., “for your own honor, that the trumpets may be sounded before you, Moses, as is done before a king.” Moses combined the offices of prophet, priest, sage, and king.<sup>27</sup> In the view of the Midrash, the silver trumpets served the additional purpose of emphasizing to the people Moses’ regal status.

**Have two silver trumpets made; make them of hammered work:** “Hammered work” in the Hebrew is *mikshah*. As emphasized by Tradition, this means that the object must be made entirely from a single silver ingot hammered out to the desired shape, rather than being assembled from separate components.

This requirement parallels the description of the Menorah, where the same word – *mikshah* – figures prominently (see Num. 8:4; Exod. 25:31 and 37:17). The Menorah too must be forged from a single solid slab of metal, but in that case not silver, but gold. The trumpets and the Menorah represent two different modes of communication.

The Menorah represents higher communication – with God (from below upward, while the Ark, also made of gold, from Above downward).

Contrarily, the trumpets are used for communication here on earth – internally within the Jewish people. They are therefore made of silver,

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<sup>27</sup> In the book of Deuteronomy (17-18), Moses explicitly requires separating these offices in the future, in order to create a balance of power in the branches of government of Jewish society. We will take a closer look at this issue in our commentary there.

Hebrew *keseḥ*, which also means “money,” something indispensable for communication within society. But *zahav*, “gold,” the material of which the Menorah is made, is not symbolic of monetary value, but of worthy human behavior (cf. “the golden mean”) which is the path to communicating with God.<sup>28</sup>

**(5) But when you sound short blasts, the divisions encamped on the east shall move forward:** Those intermittent, staccato blasts, which, taken together, the Torah here calls *terua’ah*, symbolize a shattering of integrity. It is thus a signal for movement – a disturbance of the peace. Contrarily, the *tek’iah*, a single unbroken, elongated sound, is a signal for assembly – unification. As we read below: “To convoke the congregation you shall blow long blasts, not short ones” (Num. 10:7).

The divisions encamped on the east shall move forward: This is the camp of Judah, which includes Issachar and Zebulun as well.

**(6) And when you sound short blasts a second time, those encamped on the south shall move forward:** The camp of Reuben, Simon, and Gad.

**Thus short blasts shall be blown for setting them in motion:** That is, the same sounds should be used to signal the onset of movement of the other two (the third and fourth) camps.

**(7) While to convoke the congregation you shall blow long blasts, not short ones:** When the community assembles, integrity is restored.

**(8) The trumpets shall be blown by Aaron’s sons, the priests:** The priests are responsible for proper communication within society. It was the Temple, not other branches of government, that was responsible for the unity of the Jewish people.<sup>29</sup>

**They shall be for you an institution for all time throughout the ages:** The trumpets were still used in the Second Temple, which stood in Jerusalem for four centuries, until destroyed by the Romans in

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<sup>28</sup> We have covered this issue in greater detail in our commentary to the incident of the golden calf. See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 27.1.

<sup>29</sup> This issue will be discussed in greater detail in the *Bible Dynamics* commentary on the book of Deuteronomy.

the year 70 CE. Their image can still be seen in the “spoils of Jerusalem” relief on the arch of Titus in Rome (built ca. 81 CE).

**(9) When you are at war in your land against an aggressor who attacks you, you shall sound short blasts on the trumpets:** War is a crisis, a situation of instability. The short, broken blasts reflect the unrest felt by the people.

That you may be remembered before the Lord your God and be delivered from your enemies: The sound of the trumpets counteracts fear and instills courage and joy. The Almighty will then send help from Heaven.

**(10) And on your joyous occasions – your fixed festivals and new moon days – you shall sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being. They shall be a reminder of you before your God:** I, the Lord, am your God: The sounding of the trumpets organizes the people and stimulates their emotions. The Almighty responds in turn by endowing them with success.

## § 9. THE JOURNEY BEGINS

### § 9.1 THE MARCHING ORDER (10:11-28)

יא ויהי בשנה השנית בחודש השני בעשרים בחודש געלה הענן מעל משכן העדת: יב ויסעו בני־ישראל למסעיהם ממדבר סיני וישכן הענן במדבר פארן: יג ויסעו בראשנה על־פי יי ביד־משה: יד ויסע דגל מחנה בני־יהודה בראשנה לצבאתם ועל־צבאו נחשון בן עמינדב: טו ועל־צבא מטה בני יששכר נתנאל בן־צוער: טז ועל־צבא מטה בני זבולן אליאב בן־חלן: יז והורד המשכן ונסעו בני־גרשון ובני מררי נשאי המשכן: יח ונסע דגל מחנה ראובן לצבאתם ועל־צבאו אליצור בן־שדיאור: יט ועל־צבא מטה בני שמעון שלמיאל בן־צורישידי: כ ועל־צבא מטה בני־גד אליסף בן־דעואל: כא ונסעו הקהלים נשאי המקדש והקימו את־המשכן עד־באם: כב ונסע דגל מחנה בני־אפרים לצבאתם ועל־צבאו אלישמע בן־עמיהוד: כג ועל־צבא מטה בני מנשה גמליאל בן־פדהצור: כד ועל־צבא מטה בני בנימן אבידן בן־גדעוני: כה ונסע דגל מחנה בני־דן מאסף לכל־המחנות לצבאתם ועל־צבאו אחיעזר בן־עמישדי: כו ועל־צבא מטה בני אשר פגעיאל בן־עכרן: כז ועל־צבא מטה בני נפתלי אחירע בן־עיגן: כח אלה מסעי בני־ישראל לצבאתם ויסעו:

(11) In the second year, on the twentieth day of the second month, the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle of the Pact

(12) and the Israelites set out on their journeys from the wilderness of Sinai. The cloud came to rest in the wilderness of Paran.

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- (13) When the march was to begin, at the Lord's command through Moses,
- (14) the first standard to set out, troop by troop, was the division of Judah. In command of its troops was Nahshon son of Amminadab;
- (15) in command of the tribal troop of Issachar, Nethanel son of Zuar;
- (16) and in command of the tribal troop of Zebulun, Eliab son of Helon.
- (17) Then the Tabernacle would be taken apart; and the Gershonites and the Merarites, who carried the Tabernacle, would set out.
- (18) The next standard to set out, troop by troop, was the division of Reuben. In command of its troop was Elizur son of Shedeur;
- (19) in command of the tribal troop of Simeon, Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai;
- (20) and in command of the tribal troop of Gad, Eliasaph son of Deuel.
- (21) Then the Kohathites, who carried the sacred objects, would set out; and by the time they arrived, the Tabernacle would be set up again.
- (22) The next standard to set out, troop by troop, was the division of Ephraim. In command of its troop was Elishama son of Ammihud;
- (23) in command of the tribal troop of Manasseh, Gamaliel son of Pedahzur;
- (24) and in command of the tribal troop of Benjamin, Abidan son of Gideoni.
- (25) Then, as the rear guard of all the divisions, the standard of the division of Dan would set out, troop by troop. In command of its troop was Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai;
- (26) in command of the tribal troop of Asher, Pagiel son of Ochran;

**(27) and in command of the tribal troop of Naphtali, Ahira son of Enan.**

**(28) Such was the order of march of the Israelites, as they marched troop by troop.**

**(11) In the second year, on the twentieth day of the second month:** They set out on the twentieth of Iyar, so that those who needed to observe the “supplemental Passover” on the fourteenth of Iyar could do so. All told, they spent a bit less than a year at Mount Sinai – from the first of Sivan (Exod. 19:1) until the twentieth of Iyar (the month that precedes Sivan) of the following year.

**(12) And the Israelites set out on their journeys from the wilderness of Sinai:** The description that follows here is the “normal, standard” order of movement that the Israelites were supposed to observe when crossing the wilderness. But later we will see that the first transition proceeded somewhat differently from the standard order described here (see § 9.2).

**The cloud came to rest in the wilderness of Paran:** The Paran wilderness is located on the southern border of the Land of Israel. Thus, already during the first campaign (which apparently lasted three days, as it will be explained below) they had reached the boundary of the Promised Land. And they could have entered it immediately, if not for the incident of the spies (see §§ 13-14).

**(14) The first standard to set out, troop by troop, was the division of Judah:** This tribe, Judah, leads the people, and therefore, later, will also receive the kingdom, in the time of King David and his royal dynasty.

**(15-16) In command of the tribal troop of Issachar ... and ... the tribal troop of Zebulun:** They too are members of the camp of Judah, located on the east.

**(17) Then the Tabernacle would be taken apart; and the Gershonites and the Merarites, who carried the Tabernacle, would set out:** When the camp of Judah is ready to depart, Aaron and his sons enter the Tabernacle to pack up the temple vessels and prepare them to be transported by the Kohathites. The Gershonites and Merarites

dismantle the Tent and the posts and hangings of the Tabernacle enclosure, load them onto carts, and march behind the camp of Judah.

**(18-20) The next standard to set out ... was the division of Reuben ... Simeon ... Gad:** The southern camp marches second.

**(21) Then the Kohathites, who carried the sacred objects, would set out:** The holiest objects march at the middle of the column. Thus, the standard order is:

- (i) Judah. The Tabernacle structure.
- (ii) Reuven. The vessels.
- (iii) Ephraim.
- (iv) Dan.

**And by the time they arrived, the Tabernacle would be set up again:** The Gershonites and Merarites managed to assemble the Tabernacle and its enclosure in time for the arrival of the Kohathites, so that they could immediately bring the Temple vessels inside.

**(22) The next standard to set out... was the division of Ephraim ... Manasseh ... Benjamin:** The western camp marched third. These are Rachel's sons.

**(25) Then, as the rear guard of all the divisions, ... Dan ... Asher ... Naphtali:** The northern camp marched fourth.

§ 9.2. JETHRO, MOSES, AND THE ARK (10:29-36)

יבט וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחַבֵּב בֶּן־רְעוּאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי חֲתָן מֹשֶׁה נֹסְעִים | אֲנַחְנוּ  
 אֶל־הַמֶּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר יְיָ אֱתוּ אִתְּנוּ לָכֶם לָכֶה אֲתָנוּ וְהִטְבְּנוּ לָךְ כִּי־  
 יי דָּבַר־טוֹב עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל: לֹא יֹאמֶר אֵלָיו לֹא אֵלֶיךָ כִּי אִם־אֶל־אַרְצִי  
 וְאֶל־מִוֹלְדֹתַי אֵלֶיךָ: לֹא וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־נָא תַעֲזֹב אֲתָנוּ כִּי | עַל־כֵּן יִדְעַתָּ  
 חֲנֻתָנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר וְהֵייתָ לָנוּ לְעֵינָיִם: לֵב וְהָיָה כִּי־תֵלֵךְ עִמָּנוּ וְהָיָה | הַטּוֹב  
 הַהוּא אֲשֶׁר יִיטִיב יי עִמָּנוּ וְהִטְבְּנוּ לָךְ: לֵב וַיִּסְעוּ מֵהָר יי דָּרָךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת  
 יָמִים וְאָרְזוּן בְּרִית־יְיָ נָסַע לַפְּנִיָהֶם דָּרָךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לְתוֹר לָהֶם  
 מִגֹּחֲזָה: לֵב וַעֲגוּן יי עֲלֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּנִסְעֵם מִן־הַמַּחֲנֶה:

לֵב וְהָיָה בְּנִסְעַתְּ הָאָרְזוּן וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוֹמָה | יי וַיִּפְצוּ אֲיִבָיִךָ וַיִּגְסוּ מִשְׁנֵאֵיךָ  
 מִפְּנֵיךָ: לֵב וּבְנַחְזָה יֹאמֶר שׁוּבָה יי רַבְבוֹת אֶלְפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

(29) **Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place of which the Lord has said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will be generous with you; for the Lord has promised to be generous to Israel."**

(30) **"I will not go," he replied to him, "but will return to my native land."**

(31) **He said, "Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our guide.**

(32) **So if you come with us, we will extend to you the same bounty that the Lord grants us."**

(33) **They marched from the mountain of the Lord a distance of three days. The Ark of the Covenant of the Lord traveled in front of them on that three days' journey to seek out a resting place for them;**

(34) **and the Lord's cloud kept above them by day, as they moved on from camp.**

(35) **When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance, O Lord! May Your enemies be scattered, and may Your foes flee before You!**

(36) **And when it halted, he would say: Return, O Lord, you who are Israel's myriads of thousands!**

At first glance the section that follows seems to consist of several completely unrelated topics: Moses' conversation with Jethro, the role of the cloud, and the movement of the Ark under Moses' direction. We must understand the connection between these things.

**(29) Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law:** *Choten*, can mean either "one's wife's father" or "one's wife's brother"; it is thus not clear here whether the reference here is to Jethro or to his son. (It is also not clear how we are to reconcile this passage chronologically with Exod. 18:27, where we learned that Jethro has already returned to Midian.)

However, we can consider those details less than completely pertinent, since the essence of the discussion here is the realization

of “Jethro’s function” – that function which he (or his son) declines to take upon himself, and which therefore goes to Moses instead.

**We are setting out for the place of which the Lord has said, ‘I will give it to you.’ Come with us and we will be generous with you; for the Lord has promised to be generous to Israel:** Jethro is a non-Jew who accepts upon himself the teachings of the Torah. Moses invites him not only to embrace the Jewish teachings, but to join in the destiny of the Jewish people.

Moses always strives to bring the peoples of the world closer to the Torah of Israel. In the book of Exodus (12:38) it was Moses who insisted that the *eirev rav*, the “mixed multitude,” should join the Jewish people.<sup>30</sup> The Torah is a universal doctrine intended for all of mankind. Proselytes help their respective nations to create for each nation, their own special connection with God that is most appropriate for them.

Jethro and the *eirev rav* represent two prototypical models of how non-Jews can unite with the Jewish people.

The *eirev rav*, who converted to Judaism and became a part of the Jewish people at the Exodus, are the prototype of the *geirim*, “converts to Judaism” of subsequent generations.

Jethro and his family, on the other hand, embraced the Sinai religion, but did not convert and did not become Jews. Thus, they are the prototype of the *Bnei Noach*, “Descendants of Noah” – non-Jews of the Jewish faith. (However, they follow the Seven Laws of Noah (Gen. 2:16, 9:4), but not the whole Jewish faith.) It was essential that these two models of how non-Jews can align themselves with Judaism were established at the onset of Jewish history, at the time of the creation of the Jewish nation.

**(30-32) “We will extend to you the same bounty” ... “I will not go,” he replied to him, “but will return to my native land”:** Jethro finds Moses’ promise unattractive. He can receive the same benefits in his own country.

**(31) He said, “Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our guide”:**

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<sup>30</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 12.3.

Rather than “you know where we should camp,” the literal translation is: “You know our encampment.”

Moses’ next proposal to Jethro is now different, and much more attractive. It is for Jethro to assume an important mission.

The movement of the nation occurs not simply by edict from Above; rather, it happens by virtue of a dialogue between the Jewish people and God (whose obvious representative is the cloud).

Since Jethro had earlier played a constructive role in advancing “initiatives from below” – namely, by formulating a judicial system (see Exod. 18) – Moses now invites him to continue further along the same path – specifically, with respect to the places *where* the Israelites will halt and camp. For although the cloud establishes the direction of movement of the people and where they camp, their correct positioning once there – what happens at and within each location, that is, proper organization in the life of the people – is the responsibility of their leaders.

In a certain sense, we can apply the same idea to our own lives. Divine control determines the direction of our movement, but we must ourselves choose how we arrange our position at each location on that path.

Moses tells Jethro, “You can be our guide.” But literally, “You shall be our eyes.”

A key point here is that not only does that proper encampment within each location require “eyes,” but those eyes are the eyes of those non-Jews who attach themselves to Judaism, even while they remain non-Jews; that is, the *Bnei Noach*. In other words, some aspects of Jewish life can be correctly perceived and understood only from the outside. (We shall discuss this point in greater detail below.)

This orientation toward the *Bnei Noach*, who represent the universalistic aspect of Judaism, is essential, for without it the Jewish nation cannot advance properly. Although Divine governance (the pillar of cloud) shows the way, an outside perspective is also needed. This is because the Jews are here on this earth not only for their own sake, but to fulfill their mission of being “a light of nations” (Isa. 42:6). Therefore, the Jews must also be able to see their path as the nations of the world see it.

**(32) So if you come with us, we will extend to you the same bounty that the Lord grants us: Moses is saying:** This is not just about us sharing our bounty with you. Rather, because of your participation in Jewish history and its influence on the world you will receive a share in the blessings that God bestows on us. This too is meant to be much more attractive to Jethro than the original offer. And it is the approach that Judaism offers the *Bnei Noach* even today.

**(32-33) “So if you come with us ....” They marched:** It is not clear from the text whether or not Jethro actually accepted Moses’ offer and stayed with the Israelites. We know from the later prophetic books that Jethro’s descendants lived in the land of Israel (Jud. 1:16, 4:17; 1 Sam. 15:6), from which we may surmise that some of Jethro’s descendants did remain with the Jews.

But the Torah does not tell us so explicitly. The main point here is that Jethro would not assume the function he was offered, and Moses therefore had to take on that role himself, which he did by being involved in directing the movement of the Ark.

**(33) They marched from the mountain of the Lord a distance of three days:** This was the first of the three legs of the wilderness journey, as explained earlier, from the Sinai wilderness to the Paran wilderness.

**The Ark of the Covenant of the Lord traveled in front of them on that three days’ journey:** The Hebrew is somewhat ambiguous, and without context might be understood to mean that the Ark remained consistently ahead of them by the distance of a three-day journey. But that cannot be the actual meaning here because that would have left the people with no connection whatsoever with the Ark, not even a visual one. Rather, it means as just translated – that during that three-day journey the ark was always traveling close by, and directly in front of them.

When the Ark travels in front of the people, it is assuming a warlike stance. This is different from the standard marching position, in which the Ark moves in the center of the column.

Under ordinary, peaceful conditions spiritual leadership exerts its influence “from the center,” maintaining a balance between the diverse groups of society. But in a crisis, the Ark instead assumes its “battle

position” out in front.<sup>31</sup> That is, at such times spiritual leadership must lead from the front, not from the center.

Here, too, the Ark assumes its battle position because the Israelites are now prepared to enter the land immediately to begin the conquest.

**To seek out a resting place for them:** It is the Ark that must seek a resting place for them, because Jethro (or his son) declined to take on the function of being the people’s “eyes.” The Ark, traveling out in front, will find the location of the next encampment. But the Ark is moving under Moses’ control, after all. Effectively, then, it is Moses who has now taken on these functions.

As already mentioned, this demonstrates that in the wilderness era Moses reserves for himself all those functions of governing the people that will later be delegated.

**(34) And the Lord’s cloud kept above them by day, as they moved on from camp:** The Ark is traveling out in front (the “battle position” of internal spiritual leadership), but the cloud (the Divine presence) sits above all. The Midrash understands this also in a physical sense: “The cloud provided shade, protecting the people from the scorching heat so that they could journey comfortably and without impedance through wilderness.” That is, even simple movement under such environmental conditions would have been impossible without Divine protection.

**(35) When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say:** Until Moses uttered these words neither the Ark nor the cloud could begin to move.

The Ark’s movement in front of the people and this solemn ceremony emphasize the unity of the movement of the people and the Ark. The purpose of all this is to imprint on the national consciousness an understanding that the conquest of the land, although ostensibly a military operation, is actually a religious action necessary for revealing the Divine light to all of humanity.

The ark moves by itself, but Moses, by giving it a blessing, controls the nation’s movements and encampments. Moses’ ability to be the nation’s “eyes,” a function that Jethro declined to perform, is rooted

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<sup>31</sup> We find a similar order of movement, with the Ark positioned in front, at the crossing of the Jordan (Josh. 3:6). On taking the Ark out to the battlefield, see 1 Sam. 4:3.

in Moses' most prominent quality: his ability to see a situation from the outside, to see it with a broader perspective than the people themselves can.

Moses' unique view from the outside can be detected, in particular, in how Moses addresses God in critical situations, such as the incidents of the golden calf and the report of spies. Moses' argument in those cases is, "What will the Egyptians say? What will humanity think?" Moses rescues the Jewish people only through that approach.

Apparently, Moses acquired this ability to "see things from the outside" during his decades-long stay in Midian. We have noted previously that Moses received three types of upbringing and education.

In the first stage of his life Moses grew up among his own (Jewish) people. When Pharaoh's daughter found him as a newborn on the banks of the Nile, she returned him (albeit unknowingly) to his own mother to nurse, a period that must have lasted at least two years, or perhaps even longer. But that connection continued even long thereafter. (Moses "went out to his kinsfolk" (Exod. 2:11). He knew about his brother Aaron and apparently kept in touch with him. And upon Moses' return to Egypt none of the Jews were taken by surprise. Everyone seemed to know who he was.)

After his Jewish upbringing Moses also receives an Egyptian education. He grows up in Pharaoh's palace as a member of the ruling dynasty. And in fact, this is the reason that Aaron, who was more of a community leader than a statesman, could not lead the Exodus. Because only Moses had the necessary political, state-oriented view of the world; only he could lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

Moses received his third education from Jethro in Midian.<sup>32</sup> Through that prolonged exposure, which lasted several decades, Moses acquired the universalist "pan-international" perspective of a nomad, who keeps in view not only his own country (as farmers often do), but also the surrounding countries and their dynamics.

This is why Moses can see through the eyes of Jethro, the priest of Midian, "from the outside." He grasps not only the Jewish perspective of events taking place, but their universal significance and importance

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<sup>32</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 5.12.

as well. Accordingly, even when he asks God to forgive the Jewish people, he does so in consideration of what the larger consequences of the action in question would be for the peoples of the world.

Were the Jewish nation to perish in the wilderness, Moses argues, such an outcome would be so incomprehensible to the surrounding nations, that it would no longer be merely an internal Jewish matter – it would become a problem for all of mankind.

In the end, the Almighty did in fact accept that argument. But one had to be Moses to be able to see the world from this point of view and to formulate such an argument. It was essential not only that the Jewish people would learn to have this vision, but that all humanity, on reading the biblical text in the future, would also assimilate this critical lesson. (We could phrase this point in contemporary terms that reflect modern realities: Any leader of the Jewish people must of course receive a sound Jewish education, but it is no less important that he or she has gotten a solid secular, universal education too.)

Jethro too is the bearer of a universal approach – and that is precisely why he is invited to be the “eyes” of the Jewish people. To perform that function, one needs the ability to see a situation from the outside looking in. When Jethro (or his son) declines to undertake that function, Moses himself can act on that universal level, which he does through the Ark. This is another aspect of Moses’ greatness as a teacher: he has the entire Torah concentrated within himself, which is why the Torah is called *torat Moshe* – “the Torah of Moses.”

**(35-36) When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: ... And when it halted, he would say:** In the standard Jewish synagogue liturgy, whenever the ark is opened to take out the Torah for reading, and then later again to return the Torah to the ark, these very verses are recited. The clear implication is that taking out the Torah so that it can be read publicly is likened to the transporting of the Ark of the Covenant in the wilderness.

**(35) Advance, O Lord! May Your enemies be scattered, and may Your foes flee before You!:** Israel’s enemies are *ipso facto* also the enemies of the Almighty.

**(36) And when it halted, he would say: Return, O Lord, you who are Israel’s myriads of thousands!:**

The Hebrew for “when it halted” is *u-ve-nucho*, from the same root as *menuchah*, “rest” (physical or emotional).

Yes, we must keep moving forward, but periods of rest are no less essential to our spiritual advancement. It is just at those times that an understanding of the Divine presence returns to the many thousands who may have lost their bearings under the exertions of their peregrinations.

Thus, there are two complementary states: the first is the movement that consists in overcoming Israel’s enemies, and the second is the state of rest that is necessary for restoring the national unity.

Note that Jethro would have had to indicate not only the direction and final destination of movement, but also where, when, and how to stop. The Jewish connection with the peoples of the world arises primarily in the second of those two states – not when we are at war with the enemy, but when we are encamped and at rest, when peaceful communication becomes possible.

With that said, the fact is that there is often a war going on all around us, most often not by our own choice. But how we position ourselves in our own encampment depends only on us. The *Bnei Noach*, whose representation in the Torah is Jethro, play a vital role in helping us understand the Jewish perspective on the situation.

**(35-36) When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance, O Lord! May Your enemies be scattered, and may Your foes flee before You! And when it halted, he would say: Return, O Lord, you who are Israel’s myriads of thousands!:** In actual Torah scrolls this critical passage is written in a very unusual way – bracketed between two *nuns* that are inverted from right to left. Each of these two special *nuns* is the mirror image of a normal nun (the fourteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet). This is the only place in all the five books of the Torah that letters appear reversed in this way.

These two special *nuns* serve as brackets whose purpose is to highlight the text that appears between them. The effect is to set these two verses apart from everything in the Torah that came before them and everything that will come after.

The Tradition sees these two verses as a complete, self-contained topic in their own right – almost its own independent book of the Torah.

This would mean that the Torah consists not merely of five books, but seven. According to that scheme this book of Numbers actually consists of three separate books:

- (i) From the beginning up to and including verse 10:34.
- (ii) Just these two verses, 10:35-36.
- (iii) From the next verse, 11:1 and through the end of Numbers.

What, then, is the very special character of these two verses that make them worthy of being an entire book in their own right?

In an important sense we can say that these two verses comprise, as it were, “The Book of Jethro.” In addition to performing here his primary function, Moses also takes on the role that Jethro declined to assume upon himself, the role of offering advice to God.

Because Jethro would not accept Moses’ invitation, the Ark itself must become the “eyes” of the Israelites in the wilderness. And this is why the account of Jethro’s refusal is followed immediately by this passage, the blessing for the road that Moses would recite whenever the Ark was set in motion to continue the nation’s journey.

The presence of “the Book of Jethro” here in the Torah – and later, the prophecies of Balaam<sup>33</sup> – is based on the Midrash that says that “There were three figures (in that generation), who were at so high a spiritual level that the Torah could have been given through any of them. Those three were Moses, Jethro, and Balaam. But in the end the Torah was given only through Moses.”

The reason for that choice was not that Moses was the most righteous of the three. (For had that been the determining factor, Jethro – and Balaam all the more so – could never have been considered even a possible contender with Moses.) Rather, the reason for the choice was different. The Torah was given through Moses because only he was equipped to take on all three functions: his own, Jethro’s, and Balaam’s.<sup>34</sup> The Torah of Moses therefore incorporates also “the Book

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<sup>33</sup> Num. 22-24.

<sup>34</sup> We will discuss this incident in part 2 of this commentary on the Book of Numbers.

of Jethro” and “the prophecy of Balaam.” Moses was able to assume the positive functions of both Jethro and Balaam in addition to his own, and his Torah therefore incorporates their messages as well.

### § 9.3 RUMBLINGS ON THE ROAD (11:1-10)

א וַיְהִי הָעָם כְּמִתְאַנְנִים רָע בְּאַזְנֵי יְיָ וַיִּשְׁמַע יְיָ וַיַּחַר אַפּוֹ וַתִּבְעַר-בָּם  
 אֵשׁ יְיָ וַתֹּאכַל בְּקִצֵּה הַמַּחֲנֶה: ב וַיִּצְעַק הָעָם אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל מֹשֶׁה  
 אֶל-יְיָ וַתִּשְׁקַע הָאֵשׁ: ג וַיִּקְרָא שְׁם-הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא תִבְעָרָה כִּי-בָעֲרָה  
 בָּם אֵשׁ יְיָ: ד וְהָאֶסְפָּסָף אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבּוֹ הִתְאַוּוּ תִאֲוָה וַיִּשְׁבוּ וַיִּבְכוּ גַם  
 בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִי יֵאָכְלֵנוּ בְּשֵׂר: ה זָכַרְנוּ אֶת-הַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר-נֹאכַל  
 בַּמַּצְרַיִם חֲנָם אֶת הַקִּשְׁאִים וְאֶת הָאֲבִטְחִים וְאֶת-הַחֶצִיר וְאֶת-  
 הַבְּצָלִים וְאֶת-הַשּׁוּמִים: ו וְעַתָּה נִפְשָׁנוּ יִבְשָׁה אֲיִן כֹּל בְּלִתִּי אֶל-הַמֶּן  
 עֵינֵינוּ: ז וְהַמֶּן כְּזֶרַע-גֶּד הוּא וְעֵינֵנוּ כְּעֵין הַבַּדְלָח: ח שִׁטּוֹ הָעָם וְלָקְטוּ  
 וַטְחֲנוּ בְּרִחִים אֹד דָּכּוּ בַּמַּדְלָה וּבִשְׁלוּ בַּפָּרוֹר וְעָשׂוּ אֶתּוֹ עֲגוֹת וְהָיָה  
 ט עֲמֹו כְּטַעַם לֶשֶׁת הַשָּׁמֶן: ט וּבִרְדַת הַטֹּל עַל-הַמַּחֲנֶה לֵיְלֵה יֵרֵד הַמֶּן  
 עֲלֵיו: י וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעָם בִּכְהָ לְמִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ אִישׁ לְפִתַח אָהֳלוֹ  
 וַיַּחַר-אַף יְיָ מְאֹד וּבְעֵינֵי מֹשֶׁה רָע:

- (1) The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord. The Lord heard and was incensed: a fire of the Lord broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp.
- (2) The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down.
- (3) That place was named Taberah, because a fire of the Lord had broken out against them.
- (4) The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, “If only we had meat to eat!
- (5) We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.
- (6) Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!”

(7) **Now the manna was like coriander seed, and in color it was like bdellium.**

(8) **The people would go about and gather it, grind it between millstones or pound it in a mortar, boil it in a pot, and make it into cakes. It tasted like rich cream.**

(9) **When the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall upon it.**

(10) **Moses heard the people weeping, every clan apart, each person at the entrance of his tent. The Lord was very angry, and Moses was distressed.**

**(1) The people took to complaining:** By all appearances, the people have everything they need for the journey. The marching order of the tribes has been established. The Levites have taken responsibility for transporting the Tabernacle. There is food and water, and protection from the harsh wilderness elements. The people have guides for the way – the cloud, the trumpets, and the Ark – to tell them where and when to start and to stop marching and encamp. But even with all that in place, the crisis begins almost immediately.

**(1) The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord:** Translated literally, the unusual Hebrew word *ke-mit'onenim* means: “The people were seeking, as it were, an excuse to grumble and behave badly.” The commentators understand it as saying that the people began looking for pretexts to express dissatisfaction, even when they had no actual reason to be dissatisfied. Thus, their sin, essentially, was losing their sense of gratitude to God for all the good that He had done and was doing for them.

Alternatively, however, the word *ke-mit'onenim* can be seen as very closely related to *onen*, “a person who is in mourning.” Except that the grammatical form is reflexive, which suggests that they were mourning over the loss of *themselves*. Understanding as they did that their lives would continue to unfold in an atypical and unusual manner, completely unlike the norm for other nations, they perceived that as a form of death.

**To complaining bitterly before the Lord:** The Torah does not elaborate here on what exactly the people were complaining so bitterly

about. The literal translation of “bitterly before the Lord” is “evil in the ears of the Lord.” The Midrash understands these words to mean that they were complaining to God about God Himself. Having decided that the Almighty was Himself the cause of all their difficulties, they lamented: “Woe is us! Already three days we are being led around with no rest or respite from the strains and stresses of the journey.” The Almighty, incensed, responded: “I wanted only the best for you, that you would enter the Promised Land immediately. But you imagine that you are the object of some evil plan!”

However, a different explanation is also possible, viz., that the Torah does not tell us what the people were complaining about, because even Moses himself had no clue what their problem was, and why they were so unhappy.

**The Lord heard and was incensed:** The Almighty decided that this was a serious problem that required His intervention.

**A fire of the Lord ... ravaging the outskirts of the camp:** I.e., this is only a warning, not a serious punishment.

**The outskirts of the camp:** At the center of the camp was the Tabernacle, around it camped the Levites, and around them the twelve tribes. Therefore, the “outskirts of the camp” means those who were furthest from the center, from holiness, and whose connection with it was weakest.

**(2) The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down:** Whenever the people find themselves in a bad situation, they routinely turn to Moses, who can then take some action to halt the devastation and stay the hand of death.

But here Moses does not understand the problem and makes no attempt to get to the heart of it, limiting himself instead to just “extinguishing the fire” (literally and figuratively). Thus, the initial warning is not heeded, and the situation only gets worse.

**(4) The riffraff in their midst:** The Midrash identifies this “riffraff” with the *eirev rav*, the “mixed multitude” that joined the Jews at the Exodus (Exod. 12:38). As we have already discussed,<sup>35</sup> on the one hand this is a highly problematic group, but on the other they are extremely

<sup>35</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 12.3.

important, even essential, because the Jewish mission is to bring Divine light to all of mankind, and they do so through the *eirev rav*.

**Felt a gluttonous craving:** A very literal translation is “were lusting for lust,” or, “were craving whimsies.” That is, they were feeling a capricious desire for nonessentials, things without which a person can make do perfectly well. Paradoxically, however, even such “whimsies” are a necessary part of a fulfilling and fulfilled life.

Yet another possible translation is “longed for passion.” They longed to have passion, i.e., they yearned to live a normal, natural life, rather than the artificial, sterile life they were living, as attested by the “heavenly bread” (manna) they received daily – tasty, nutritious, and aesthetically pleasing, but monotonous, and provided by Divine decree merely as a substance that guarantees minimum survival.

**And then the Israelites wept and said, “If only we had meat to eat!:** The Israelites were not the initiators of this complaint, they were only following the lead of the *eirev rav*. While this can be seen as a mitigating factor in their guilt, it also means that the Jewish people at that stage had no independent sense of *chutzpah*. This will later become the source of an even worse problem.

The Israelites themselves expressed this wish and the ones that follow, whereas the Torah does not indicate what the *eirev rav* was actually lusting for. That is, the *eirev rav* served as an abstract trigger for the Israelites to have desires, but not for any specific, identifiable desire.

**The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, “If only we had meat to eat!:** The Hebrew includes the word *gam*, “also” or “too.” That is, “and then the Israelites wept too.” When the cravings of the riffraff began, the Israelites wept with them. But it was a “copycat weeping” – the Israelites were only following the lead of the mixed multitude.

**And said, “If only we had meat to eat!:** The Midrash notes that they actually did have meat. At the Exodus the Torah stated very clearly: “Moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds” (Exod. 12:38). Thus, the essence of their complaint was obviously not the food itself.

**(5) We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt:** As slaves in Egypt performing backbreaking labor, they were hardly fed for free. But they recall it that way, inaccurately idealizing their former Egyptian life. This demonstrates that the people are emotionally unprepared to advance.

**(5-6) The cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all!:** The detailed list of foods mentioned here emphasizes their significant psychological value, which went beyond their mere nutritional importance.

**Nothing but this manna to look to!":** Morning and evening, there is nothing but manna everywhere we look!

With this obvious gross exaggeration, the people bemoan their monotonous life.

**(7) Now the manna was like coriander seed:** In size the manna resembled pepper seed.

**And in color it was like bdellium:** It was a mild and aesthetically pleasing food.

**(8) The people would go about and gather it, grind it between millstones or pound it in a mortar, boil it in a pot:** The point being made is that the manna was easy to obtain and easy to process.

**And make it into cakes. It tasted like rich cream:** Here are emphasized the manna's exquisite taste and its ability to sate the eater.

**(9) When the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall upon it:** The "bread from the sky" (Exod. 16:4) is consistently available and very conveniently obtainable. The problem, therefore, was not that the people were short of water or food. There was quite enough food, but not enough interesting things to look at.

The people were living "anomalous life" in the wilderness. In a very real sense, they lived not on earth, but in servitude to Heaven, and even the food they ate – an anomalous food, "bread from the sky" – was itself a vivid symbol of this. We can compare it to the "space food" that astronauts eat, which they squeeze from a tube like so much toothpaste. Such tube food might taste like meat, but they do not want such "meat." They want real meat.

Until only recently the Israelites had spent almost a year at Mount Sinai, in direct dialogue with God, cut off from natural life. They had thus been hoping that that unusual episode in their lives was now behind them, that they could now finally begin to live a normal life. But that is not how things have turned out, and the built-up tension leads to an explosion. The Israelites are seeking “whimsies” (desires, lusts), they are “longing for passion.” A human being who can never indulge his caprices is a machine – a robot, or perhaps even an angel, but not a human. The people are longing to return to a normal human existence.

**(10) Moses heard the people weeping, every clan apart, each person at the entrance of his tent:** In the previous instance (Num. 11:2), Moses was able to extinguish the fire, but he did not use the crisis to understand the people’s problems and to establish rapport with them. This time Moses has given ear to their problems, but there is still no mutual understanding. He is therefore confused, not knowing what to do.

In the incident of the golden calf Moses acted quickly and decisively, crushing resistance with military force. But here there is no actual resistance nor an organized protest; the people have simply lost heart, which is not something that can be remedied by giving orders.

It seems that Moses cannot possibly do any more than he has done. The people have everything they need, and are about to begin their conquest of the land. They are working toward the realization of lofty ideals. But suddenly it turns out that this is still not enough. The people still lack a certain “fullness of normal life” (called here “a craving for passion”), without which they do not wish to live. Moses is therefore powerless to correct the situation.

**Moses heard the people weeping ... The Lord was very angry:** At the beginning of this chapter, in describing the initial episode of discontent, the text said, “The Lord heard and was incensed.” If we compare the two verses, we understand that in that case, only the Lord heard, but Moses did not “hear.” That is, he failed to grasp the essence of the problem, which he finally does only now.

Moreover, in that first instance God was merely “incensed,” but here He is “very angry.” (The Hebrew in both cases is *va-yichar*, but here the intensifier *me’od*, “very,” is added.)

We can explain this difference as saying that in this latter case, God's anger was directed not only at the people, for failing to heed His previous warning, but at Moses as well, who even after the first clear signs of a serious problem still made no special effort to get to the heart of the matter.

In a certain sense, the punishment in the first instance of discontent, “a fire from the Lord,” can be likened to the kind of physical pain that is not just an external problem, but a symptom of more serious internal anomalies. Moses, not grasping this point, and failing to understand the underlying reasons for the people's discontent, therefore tried to alleviate only the pain itself by prescribing a “pain reliever.” And so now he is faced with a more troubling situation: there is no pain (“fire”) at this time, but only the actual problem itself, and Moses has no clear sense of how to address it.

**And Moses was distressed:** The previous discontent among the population was not a disaster for Moses by any means. He received a signal (the people cried out to him), he reacted (took his request to God), and the imminent danger was quickly averted.

But here the situation is incomprehensible to him. The people are dispirited and downcast, but Moses is powerless to help them. Inasmuch as he saw nothing wrong in his prior actions, he cannot escape the fact that he is now facing not merely a minor, transient problem, but nothing less than a calamity, a crisis that fully threatens his status as leader of the nation.

#### § 9.4. MOSES' PERPLEXITY (11:11-15)

יא ויאמר משה אל־י למה הרעַתָּ לַעֲבָדֶיךָ וְלָמָּה לֹא־מַצַּתִּי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְשׁוֹם אֶת־מִשְׁאָא בְּלִהְעֵם הַזֶּה עָלַי: יב הָאֲנֹכִי הָרִיתִי אֶת כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה אִם־אֲנֹכִי יִלְדָתִיהוּ כִּי־תֹאמֶר אֵלִי שְׂאֵהוּ בְּחִיקֶךָ בְּאִשֶׁר יִשָּׂא הָאִמֹן אֶת־הַיֶּלֶק עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתָּיו: יג מֵאִן לִי בָשָׂר לָתֵת לְכָל־הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־יִבְכוּ עָלַי לֵאמֹר תִּנְהַלְנוּ בָשָׂר וְנֹאכְלָה: יד לֹא־אוּכַל אֲנֹכִי לְבַדִּי לְשִׂאת אֶת־כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי כָבֵד מִמֶּנִּי: טו וְאִם־כִּכָּה | אֶת־עֲשֵׂה לִי הֲרַגְנִי נָא הֲרֹג אִם־מַצַּאתִי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְאֶל־אַרְאֶה בְּרַעְתִּי:

(11) **And Moses said to the Lord, “Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me?”**

(12) **Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,’ to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers?**

(13) **Where am I to get meat to give to all this people, when they whine before me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’**

(14) **I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me.**

(15) **If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!”**

**(11) And Moses said to the Lord:** Moses is known in Jewish tradition as *Moshe Rabeinu*, “Moses, our teacher.” We usually perceive this title as strictly positive, as indicating the highest achievable level of greatness.

But it turns out that in reality, Moses’ choice to prioritize teaching among other activities actually limits him. But it turns out that in reality, Moses’ orientation to teaching exclusively actually limits him. Moses has difficulty responding to the challenge that is addressed to him, not merely as a teacher of students, who are limited by the narrow framework of their educational institution, but as the leader of a free people.

In essence, the people’s request for meat was not merely a national rebellion, but a personal challenge to Moses’ leadership abilities. Would he manage to find a positive core within their impudent behavior, and thus achieve mutual understanding with the people? In fact, this was a problem that Moses was unable to solve.

**And Moses said to the Lord, “Why have You dealt ill with Your servant?”:** Earlier, the people spoke similarly. We read: “The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord.” They said, “Why have you brought us here?” We see that the people’s deficiency is also a flaw in Moses himself. He, too, blames God for the problem, instead of trying to understand the mistakes that are its underlying cause.

**And why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me?:** By “enjoying God’s favor,” Moses means that he would not need to deal with the entire nation as a whole, and instead could teach the Torah only to the best disciples, those who have a genuine desire to understand it. He would then not need to bother himself with the troublesome ones.

**(12) Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,’ to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers?:** Moses is the people’s teacher, not their parent. Therefore, he can pass on the Torah only to those who are willing to listen to him. He is not prepared to take up the disgruntled folk and carry them in his arms.

A parent’s inextricable connection to his or her child is based on their blood relationship. But the connection between teacher and student endures only as long as the latter continues to meet the standards of the school.

From the very outset, a parent sees his child as just a work in progress. Childhood is only one temporary stage of life. Ultimately the parent is determined to communicate with the child as an adult and an independent personality, and the parent tends to take for granted that this will eventually happen.

Even from the time of the child’s birth the parent never idealizes childhood, because he is oriented toward seeing the child grow up. Moreover, the parent wants the child to overtake him at some stage, and gives the child all possible support in advance in order to achieve that outcome. The parent therefore sees his child’s independent and audacious nature as something normal and very often even as a positive development.

But a teacher’s orientation toward his young students is entirely different. He relates to them exclusively as children, and this remains an immutable parameter in their relationship. As a teacher’s work at school is always only with children, he has no reason to see them as adults or even envision them as ever becoming adults. In his worldview as teacher there is a tacit (but obviously false) assumption that his students will forever remain children. He demands obedience and

humility from them, and he sees any audacity or independence that they might demonstrate as nothing but a serious hindrance to learning.

**(13) Where am I to get meat to give to all this people:** Moses' main problem is the people's chutzpah, their impudence in demanding meat when they have manna. The people seek to satisfy their whims, and Moses finds this intolerable. But without whims there is no development or advancement, and no natural life. In other words, those whims of the people are a major challenge now confronting Moses, and he is unable to deal with that challenge.

**Where am I to get meat:** Moses perceives the problem merely in its physical aspect – the lack of meat. But the real problem lies elsewhere, in the people's unwillingness to continue their abnormal way of life in the wilderness.

**(14) I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me:** Moses cannot continue to lead the people in the manner that he did before. Moses himself is quite satisfied with the manna, but he struggles to be the leader of a people who want meat. The Almighty therefore gives him "prophet-helpers" who demonstrate the qualities that are needed in order to be, as it were, "parents" to the people.

**(15) If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!:** Moses' response here strikes us as gross over-reaction. Should he really be asking to die simply because the people want meat? In other, earlier situations, when Pharaoh's army was chasing them down at the Sea of Reeds, or when the people created the golden calf, Moses showed himself a strong leader, not backing down even in the face of the most severe difficulties. But here he is perplexed precisely because he cannot figure out in which direction to move. Moses' approach to leading the people suddenly turns out to be entirely inadequate. His worldview collapses and he is no longer able to function.

## § 9.5. THE SEVENTY PROPHET-ELDERS (11:16-30)

טז וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶסְפֶּה־לִּי שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ מִזְקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יִדְעָתָּ בִּי־הֵם זִקְנֵי הָעָם וְשֹׁטְרָיו וְלִקְחָתָּ אִתָּם אֶל־אֶהָל מוֹעֵד וְהִתְיַצְבוּ שָׁם עִמָּדִי: יז וַיִּרְדֹּתִי וּדְבַרְתִּי עִמָּדִי שָׁם וְאֶצְלָתִי מִז־הָרוּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָלִיד וְשַׁמְתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם וְנִשְׁאָו אֶתְדָּ בְּמִשְׁאֵ הָעָם וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא אֶתְהָ לְבַדָּדִי: יח וְאֶל־הָעָם תֹּאמַר הִתְקַדְּשׁוּ לְמַחֲרָ וְאֶכְלֹתֶם בָּשָׂר כִּי בְכִיתֶם בְּאֲזְנֵי יי לֵאמֹר מִי יֵאכְלֵנוּ בָּשָׂר כִּי־טוֹב לָנוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם וְנָתַן יי לָכֶם בָּשָׂר וְאֶכְלֹתֶם: ט לא יוֹם אֶתְדָּ תֵאכְלוּן וְלֹא יוֹמִים וְלֹא | חֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים וְלֹא עֶשְׂרֵה יָמִים וְלֹא עֶשְׂרִים יוֹם: כ עד | חֲדָשׁ יָמִים עַד אֲשֶׁר־יֵצֵא מֵאֲפֻכְכֶם וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְזֵרָא יַעַן כִּי־מֵאֲסַתֶּם אֶת־יִי אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְתִבְכוּ לְפָנָיו לֵאמֹר לָמָּה זֶה יַעֲזָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם: כא וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה שִׁש־מֵאוֹת אֶלָּה רְגְלֵי הָעָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ וְאַתָּה אֹמֶרְתָּ בָּשָׂר אֶתְהָ לָּהֶם וְאֶכְלוּ חֲדָשׁ יָמִים: כב הֲצִאֵן וּבִקֵּר יִשְׁחַט לָהֶם וּמִצָּא לָהֶם אִם אֶת־כָּל־דְּגֵי הַיָּם יֵאֱסֹף לָהֶם וּמִצָּא לָהֶם:

כג וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הִינֵד יי תִּקְצֹר עִתָּהּ תִּרְאָה הִיִּקְרָךְ דְּבָרֵי אִם־לֹא: כד וַיַּעַז מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל־הָעָם אֶת דְּבָרֵי יי וַיֵּאֱסֹף שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ מִזְקְנֵי הָעָם וַיַּעֲמֵד אִתָּם סְבִיבֹת הָאֶהָל: כה וַיִּרֶד יי | בַּעֲנֵן וַיְדַבֵּר אֵלָיו וַיֵּצֵא מִן־הָרוּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו וַיִּתֵּן עַל־שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ הַזְּקֵנִים וַיְהִי כְּנֹחַ עֲלֵיהֶם הָרוּחַ וַיִּתְנַבְּאוּ וְלֹא יָסְפוּ: כו וַיִּשְׁאָרוּ שְׁנֵי־אֲנָשִׁים | בְּמַחֲנֵה שָׁם הָאֶתְדָּ | אֶלְדָּד וְשֵׁם הַשְּׁנַי מִיִּדָּד וְתַנּוּחַ עֲלֵיהֶם הָרוּחַ וְהִמָּה בְּכַתְּבֵים וְלֹא יַעֲזוּ הָאֶהָלָה וַיִּתְנַבְּאוּ בְּמַחֲנֵה: כז וַיִּרְץ הַנְּעַר וַיַּגִּד לְמֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְדָּד וּמִיִּדָּד מִתְנַבְּאִים בְּמַחֲנֵה: כח וַיַּעַן יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נוּן מִשֶּׁרֶת מֹשֶׁה מִבְּחַרְיוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדָנִי מֹשֶׁה כִּלְאָם: כט וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה הֲמִקְנָא אֶתְהָ לִּי וּמִי יִתֵּן כָּל־עַם יי נְבִיאִים כִּי־יִתֵּן יי אֶת־רוּחוֹ עֲלֵיהֶם: ל וַיֵּאֱסֹף מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֵה הוּא וְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

(16) Then the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for Me seventy of Israel's elders of whom you have experience as elders and officers of the people, and bring them to the Tent of Meeting and let them take their place there with you.

(17) I will come down and speak with you there, and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them; they shall share the burden of the people with you, and you shall not bear it alone.

(18) And say to the people: Purify yourselves for tomorrow and you shall eat meat, for you have kept whining before the Lord and saying, 'If only we had meat to eat! Indeed, we were better off in Egypt!' The Lord will give you meat and you shall eat.

(19) You shall eat not one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty,

(20) but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you. For you have rejected the Lord who is among you, by whining before Him and saying, 'Oh, why did we ever leave Egypt!'"

(21) But Moses said, "The people who are with me number six hundred thousand men; yet You say, 'I will give them enough meat to eat for a whole month.'

(22) Could enough flocks and herds be slaughtered to suffice them? Or could all the fish of the sea be gathered for them to suffice them?"

(23) And the Lord answered Moses, "Is there a limit to the Lord's power? You shall soon see whether what I have said happens to you or not!"

(24) Moses went out and reported the words of the Lord to the people. He gathered seventy of the people's elders and stationed them around the Tent.

(25) Then the Lord came down in a cloud and spoke to him; He drew upon the spirit that was on him and put it upon the seventy elders. And when the spirit rested upon them, they spoke in ecstasy, but did not continue.

(26) Two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, had remained in camp; yet the spirit rested upon them – they were among those recorded, but they had not gone out to the Tent – and they spoke in ecstasy in the camp.

**(27) A youth ran out and told Moses, saying, “Eldad and Medad are acting the prophet in the camp!”**

**(28) And Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ attendant from his youth, spoke up and said, “My lord Moses, restrain them!”**

**(29) But Moses said to him, “Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord put His spirit upon them!”**

**(30) Moses then reentered the camp together with the elders of Israel.**

Moses mentions two problems: the lack of meat, and the impossibility of continuing his leadership in its prior form. But the Almighty first solves the problem of leadership, and only then performs “shock therapy” to address the issue of meat. If the spiritual leadership is ill prepared to deal with the people and their issues, shock therapy will only bring the people to greater confusion. They must have a well-organized leadership. At the right moment, as new opportunities are revealed, that leadership will move the people in the direction they need to go.

The crisis here is quite different from the crisis in the incident of the golden calf. In that case there was an act of disobedience, a rebellion against God’s covenant and a direct violation of His commandments. (According to the Midrash, it even included an egregious act of violence – the murder of Hur.<sup>36</sup>) Moses therefore saw fit to use force to suppress that rebellion.

But here the people are not refusing to proceed on the journey, nor are they rebelling against the authorities. This is a very different type of crisis – it is a crisis of values. The people are disappointed with what is happening; their value system is deteriorating. This kind of crisis cannot be corrected with brute force. Rather, it requires introducing new values and new guidelines into the environment. But Moses does not know how to accomplish that, and it leaves him confused and perplexed.

As already discussed, Aaron understands the Jewish people very well. But his understanding of Divinity is likely defective, which is why

<sup>36</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 27.2.

he came to create the golden calf. Moses, on the contrary, understands Divinity at a very high level, but his understanding of people is deficient, and he therefore often fails to properly influence the nation he leads.

Moses is not sufficiently connected with the people – he “did not conceive all these people nor bear them.” He therefore needs helpers who are organically connected with the people and can provide support for their value system.

The problem of values in this entire story is a problem of *anavah* vs. *chutzpah*, that is, obedience and humility vs. independence and insolence, as explained earlier. When the Divine spirit passes from Moses to the seventy prophet-elders, on the one hand they are still dependent on him, and there is hierarchy and obedience, *anavah*. However, on the other hand, they are able to prophesy entirely on their own, and this independence is the basis for *chutzpah*. As this duality creates the right balance between these values, the calling of the seventy prophet-elders is to show the rest of the people an example of that balance.

Immediately after this appointment, the punishment of the quails is visited on the people, and those who cannot rein themselves in meet with death. But more precisely, it is a synthesis of punishment for the incorrigible and advancement of values for those who are able to perceive those values.

When Moses says, “I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me,” this does not mean that Moses led the people entirely on his own and had no helpers. Even much earlier, two lines of government had already been formed among the people.

The first of those is the “chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens” (Exod. 18:21), over whom the chieftains of the tribes hold sway. This system controls the movement of the people and their disposition during encampment. It also serves as a judicial system for resolving internal conflicts among the people, and it organizes the people for waging war.

The second line of government is the system of communication with the Tabernacle, as represented by Aaron and his sons, who are the *kohanim* “priests,” and the Levites. The purpose of this system, which has replaced the leadership of the firstborns, is to establish

communication with holiness. But like the first system, this one is an apparatus of the state and is subordinate to Moses. (In contemporary terms, the first system is the secular aspect of the state apparatus, while the second is its religious element, i.e., the chief rabbinate.)

But it turns out that these two systems are not alone sufficient. In order for a nation to function, in addition to systems of political or religious power, it needs a value system that is oriented to each individual and also to the people as a whole, whose needs, however, are diverse. (This is symbolized here by the diversity of foods that they want to replace the monotonous manna.) But the officials who are subordinated to Moses are not able to provide the people with the fulfillment of this need.

Thus, in order to fully realize his leadership, Moses needs not only subordinates, but also comrades-in-arms who, with all due respect to him, will be independent of Moses, not subservient to him. It is with these goals in mind that a third line of government is now being formed – a coterie of prophet-elders, who, while hierarchically consociated with Moses, are actually closer to the people. They bring from Moses to the people multiple variations on a single theme, i.e., the sense of a personal connection with the Almighty.

Prophecy (with the sole exception of Moses' prophecy, as the Torah will soon tell us explicitly) must not serve as a basis for legislation. Prophecy, an anarchic branch of power, as it were,<sup>37</sup> is the foundation for creating ideals, images, and completing legal norms with value-based meaning. (Thus it creates the foundation for value-driven interpretation of the law.) Prophet-elders (as opposed to the chiefs of thousands and hundreds, the tribal chieftains, and the priests and Levites), receive no special power of authority or preference. Their influence is based only on personal authority and that additional charisma that they acquire when they are elevated to the level of prophecy. If we were to express this in modern terms, we could say that their sphere of activity is the formation of ideas and philosophical concepts, a value system and ideology.

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<sup>37</sup> This topic will be covered in greater detail in the *Bible Dynamics* commentary on the book of Deuteronomy.

With respect to the division of concerns between Moses and Aaron, as they relate to the channels of human connection to holiness (as already discussed<sup>38</sup>) the *kohanim* represent “Aaron’s temple,” the temple of atonement, while the prophet-elders represent “Moses’ temple,” the temple of Divine revelation.

Later, in his politico-religious will and testament, Moses delineates the categories of power that are to exist within the people (the Book of Deuteronomy<sup>39</sup>). Four domains of power are mentioned: the king, the Temple, the sages, and the prophets. The royal line continues the line of the “chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens” and the chieftains of the tribes, the Temple authority is Aaron and the priests, and the line of the prophets originates in the convocation of the prophet-elders being formulated here.

**(16) Then the Lord said to Moses, “Gather for Me ...”:** As already noted, in order for the punishment’s “shock therapy” to be effective, the people are first given a positive ideal, in relation to which the correction can then be achieved. Without such an ideal, punishment will only engender misunderstanding and bitterness, not correction. God therefore addresses first the creation of a group of prophet-elders who show the Jewish people how to combine the ideals of *anavah*, “humility,” and *chutzpah*, “impudence,” and only after that, the matter of the meat.

**Seventy of Israel’s elders:** Seventy is one of the Torah’s typological numbers, understood as indicating the completeness of a thing after considering the phenomenon from all sides. Other examples:

- During the resettlement of mankind after the Flood seventy nations of the world came into existence.
- Upon the arrival of Jacob’s family in Egypt, they numbered seventy souls.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 21.

<sup>39</sup> Deut. 17-18.

<sup>40</sup> See Gen. 10 and 46:27. Deut. 32:8 sees a direct connection between these two counts: “When the Most High gave nations their homes and set the divisions of man, He fixed the boundaries of peoples in relation to Israel’s numbers.”

- In the Oral Torah there is an idea that the Torah has seventy “faces” (that is, any statement in the Torah has seventy equally valid interpretations).
- In later eras, the Sanhedrin consisted of seventy-one sages, based on the number of the prophetic convocation of the elders mentioned here (seventy and Moses).

The above list is by far not exhaustive.

But we should also note that seventy elders are already mentioned early on, very soon after the Exodus (Exod. 24:1). Since here Moses must assemble the same number of elders yet again, the Midrash explains that those first seventy were consumed by the fire of Taberah (Num. 11:1 3), and it was therefore necessary to choose another seventy. Following our approach, this would mean that the leaders who left Egypt were no longer able to promote the required value system. Now unsuited to carry out their mission in the wilderness, they must therefore depart, to be replaced by the new assemblage.

However, a problem arises in the process of choosing these prophet-elders. Because seventy is not evenly divisible by twelve, it becomes impossible to give equal representation in this group to all tribes. Therefore, we will see later that the actual number of prophet-elders, in the process of the advancement of *chutzpah*, was “corrected from below,” to become not seventy, but seventy-two. The initial problematic nature of the proposed number of prophet-elders reflects the fundamental conflict that always arises with the decentralization of spiritual leadership, although such decentralization is in fact necessary for the healthy functioning of society.

**Of whom you have experience as elders and officers of the people:** The men now selected have already earned a respected social status. The Hebrew word used here for “officers,” *shoterim*, is found earlier in the Torah in the account of the Egyptian bondage (where it is translated as “foremen”): “And the foremen of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten” (Exod. 5:14). The Midrash therefore sees a connection between these two verses, and states that the prophet-elders elected here were chosen primarily from those same foremen. And the Midrash explains: “Because those men endured so much for sake of the Jewish people, let them now be

honored by being appointed as their elders.” Thus, it is not the best students who are chosen, but those who have an essential, real-life connection to the people, and not merely a pedagogical association.

In light of their past, these men have already won the trust of the people, which means that they can continue to influence them. In this sense these officers are, as it were, “parents” to the people – a quality that Moses himself lacks.

**(17) I will come down and speak with you there, and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them:** The Midrash emphasizes: “I will speak *with you* there,” and not with them independently of you. “I will draw upon the spirit that is on you” – I will not give them the spirit of prophecy independently of you. Thus, the hierarchy is here preserved – although the prophet-elders are not subordinate to Moses, they are his collaborators. Spiritual leadership can be constructed only in this way. (That is, as opposed to managerial leadership, whose essence is subordination.)

But then later (Num. 11:26-27), as exemplified by Eldad and Medad, we see that prophecy by its very nature “spills over,” pushing the boundaries not only of the previously established framework, but of the hierarchy as well. This is the most important parameter of spirituality that has the quality of *chutzpah*.

**(18) And say to the people: Purify yourselves for tomorrow and you shall eat meat:** “Purify yourselves” here in Hebrew is *hitkadeshu* – literally, “sanctify (or consecrate) yourselves.” That is, take this matter seriously. This underscores the seriousness of the warning that follows concerning the meat.

**For you have kept whining before the Lord and saying, ‘If only we had meat to eat! Indeed, we were better off in Egypt!’:** In and of itself, the request for meat would not be all that problematic, if not for the fact that it was expressed from the position of “we would be better off in Egypt.”

**(19-20) You shall eat not one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty, but a whole month:** The number of days expresses the nature of the food and how it is consumed. To eat meat one day is nothing out of the ordinary. Two days is a double measure – food eaten in more sufficient quantity. Five days, like the number of fingers on

one hand, means that the food is eaten with a full hand, that is, with gluttony. And ten days – to grab with *both* hands, with gluttony twice as bad. Eating meat for twenty days means to eat with both hands and both feet, i.e., to reach the state of an animal in food consumption. And finally, to eat meat for an entire month means to absolutely devote oneself to that food.

**Purify yourselves for tomorrow ... until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you:** The Almighty forewarns that meat will become utterly repugnant to them, and He gives them a day to think it over. Those who are still able to change their minds will do so, and desist from their fatal lust before it is too late.

**For you have rejected the Lord who is among you, by whining before Him and saying, ‘Oh, why did we ever leave Egypt!’:** This emphasizes once again that the reason for God’s anger is not the actual request for meat, but the fact that it is expressed as regret for having left Egypt.

This regret demonstrates acceptance of slavery, which means that the people are not yet ready to achieve their independence. In light of this lack of independence, all their pretensions of *chutzpah*, expressed in the desire for meat, lack sufficient justification.

As already noted (see § 9.3), the Israelites were not the initiators of the “lust for passion”; rather, it began with the *eirev rav*, the “mixed multitude.” The people took to crying only in the wake of that unworthy example. The *eirev rav* are former Egyptians who joined the Jews at the Exodus. And because they were never slaves, they are a more independent group of people, in whom a manifestation of *chutzpah* is quite normal. The Israelites, however, following the *eirev rav*, turned that *chutzpah* into a request for meat specifically. Their internal development was inconsistent with their demand. Therefore, after receiving what they had asked for, they immediately began to die.

**(21-22) The people who are with me number six hundred thousand men; yet You say, ‘I will give them enough meat to eat for a whole month.’ Could enough flocks and herds be slaughtered to suffice them?:** Even after all the miracles of the Exodus and the giving of the Torah, Moses is of course not questioning the Almighty’s ability to perform a miracle. The meaning of these questions and

doubts of Moses, lies not in the question of the physical possibility of obtaining meat, but in the moral and psychological aspect of fulfilling the people's request – and, accordingly, in its effectiveness.

Moses' question is this: "Even if we were to slaughter all the available livestock, and bring them all the fish from the sea, would they be satisfied? Or would it still not be enough for them? After all, the demands of those who have asked for meat, thus rejecting the manna, were dictated not by hunger, but by a general dissatisfaction with their dependence on God, and by their desire to live like all the nations, to eat ordinary food and not 'bread from heaven.' So, even if they were to receive meat by virtue of some miracle, would it satisfy them?"

**(23) And the Lord answered Moses, "Is there a limit to the Lord's power?":** Moses' doubt relate not to the physical possibility of a miracle, but to its effectiveness, and God therefore answers him in this same spirit: Yes, the Almighty has complete influence not only in the physical sense (which is obvious), but also in a more fundamental sense – He can indeed create a situation that will materially influence the people's education.

**(24) Moses went out and reported the words of the Lord to the people:** He relayed God's warning. This was a prerequisite for the success of the shock therapy that would soon follow.

**He gathered seventy of the people's elders and stationed them around the Tent:** The Tabernacle is the very essence of prophecy (and of the priesthood as well).

**(25) Then the Lord came down in a cloud and spoke to him; He drew upon the spirit that was on him and put it upon the seventy elders:** Moses' primacy over all other prophets in the hierarchy is preserved. But they do not obey Moses – they simply cooperate with him.

**And when the spirit rested upon them, they spoke in ecstasy, but did not continue:** Notwithstanding the translation given here, the expression *ve-lo yasafu* can have two opposite meanings:

(i) "They did not add." I.e., they could not continue. They could prophesy only on that very day, after which they lost the ability.

"They did not cease." Once they received the gift of prophecy it never left them again.

(The Midrash cites both of these opinions. That is, both views of the situation, although they are diametrical opposites, are also simultaneously true.<sup>41</sup>) This emphasizes the point that these prophet-elders were able to synthesize both ideals – *anavah*, “humility,” prophesying only within the framework they have received from Moses, and *chutzpah*, “impudence,” when, upon receiving from Moses the initial impulse to prophecy, they never stop prophesying, for they have acquired independent mastery of this level of prophecy.

**(26) Two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, had remained in camp; yet the spirit rested upon them – they were among those recorded, but they had not gone out to the Tent – and they spoke in ecstasy in the camp:** The Midrash explains this situation as follows. Said Moses: “No tribe will agree to have fewer representatives than all the other tribes.”

He therefore first created a list of seventy-two men – six from each of the twelve tribes – to participate in a draw. He then created a set of seventy-two lots, of which seventy said “elder” and two were left blank. To the two men who had drawn the empty lots Moses said: “It is the Almighty’s decision that you should not be chosen.” These two men were Eldad and Medad.

It was important to have an equal number of prophet-elders from each tribe, because each tribe had its own character, and therefore had to be equally represented in the assemblage of prophet-elders. However, this meant that from the very beginning the Almighty’s command to appoint seventy prophets was problematic. This appointment had to happen “unevenly,” and through this the Almighty shows Moses the importance of *chutzpah*, as we shall explain.

Eldad and Medad began to prophesy in the camp at their own initiative. The point here is that although they did not receive a place at the Tabernacle, they saw that as no reason at all to refrain from

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<sup>41</sup> Like *yasafu*, “add,” here, Gen. 38:26 uses the very same word (but in the singular, *yasaf*), which there too simultaneously sustains the same two entirely opposite meanings. The context there is the matter of Judah and Tamar’s continued physical relations following their first unplanned, intimate union, and after the true nature of their relationship had been clarified. See Bible Dynamics on Gen. 38.

prophesying. Thus, their prophecy is in some sense a superfluous, “excess” prophecy.

But what is “excess” prophecy in this situation? Moses needed helpers for coping with the problems of the people he led. But these two men, apparently, would only interfere with that need. They were therefore not included among those invited to the Tabernacle (i.e., those who hierarchically, in their prophecy, were subservient to Moses). Their prophecy is not within the hierarchy of connection with Moses, and it is therefore an “excess” prophecy.

The Torah does not tell us what was the actual content of their prophecy, but only stresses its anomalous character. The Midrash, however, elaborates, saying that Eldad and Medad prophesied two things. First, “Moses will die in the wilderness, and Joshua will lead the people of Israel into the Land of Israel.” And then they spoke also of the war of Gog and Magog, which relates to Messianic times. Both of these things were outside of Moses’ spiritual space.

**(27) A youth ran out and told Moses, saying, “Eldad and Medad are acting the prophet in the camp!”:** The Midrash avers that this youth was Gershom, Moses’ elder son.

**(28) And Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ attendant from his youth, spoke up and said, “My lord Moses, restrain them!”:** Moses’ son and disciple are both frightened by what is happening. The seventy elders, who prophesy by the power that is now vested in them by God through Moses, are acting well within the limits of what is permissible. But Eldad and Medad, on the other hand, prophesy with a different force not drawn from Moses; it is their own, independent prophecy, about some aspect of Revelation not accessible to Moses himself, namely: the message that Moses will not reach the Land of Israel, and the prophecy concerning the war of Gog and Magog, i.e., the Messianic era. Rabbi A. I. Kook explains that there is a barrier here that Moses cannot cross, and which impedes the dissemination of his prophecy.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Thus, although Moses is the greatest of all prophets, the Messianic times are not adequately revealed to him. Perhaps this is why the Messianic era is never mentioned explicitly in the Torah.

(29) But Moses said to him, “Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord put His spirit upon them!”: Moses’ response demonstrates a monumental advancement on his part. Although Eldad and Medad prophesy ideas that directly contradict his own attitudes, Moses nonetheless has no desire to obstruct their prophesying. He wants *everyone* to be a prophet, even if this will be a hindrance to him. Moses acknowledges the chutzpah of Eldad and Medad as something entirely positive.

(30) **Moses then reentered the camp together with the elders of Israel:** This reentry to the camp is psychological, and not merely physical (otherwise, the Torah would have no reason to mention it explicitly). The prophet-elders return to the camp in order to influence the people from within. And Moses too, having received their support, feels more confident. He has now overcome his conflict in relating to the people that arose in him earlier, and in a psychological sense is thus restored to them.

#### § 9.6. THE EPISODE OF THE QUAILS (11:31-35)

לא ורוח נסע | מאת יי ויגזו שלמים מן-הים ויטש על-המחנה בדרך יום  
 זה וכדרך יום זה סביבות המחנה וכאמתיים על-פני הארץ: לב ויקם  
 העם כל-היום ההוא וכל-הלילה וכל | יום המחנה ויאספו את-  
 השלל הממעיט אסף עשרה חמרים וישטחו להם שטוח סביבות  
 המחנה: לג הבשר עודנו בין שניהם טרם יכרת ואף יל חרה בעם  
 ויד | בעם מכה רבה מאד: לד ויקרא את-שם-המקום ההוא קברות  
 התאנה כי-שם קברו את-העם המתאנים: לה מקברות התאנה נסעו  
 העם חצרות ויהיו בחצרות:

(31) A wind from the Lord started up, swept quail from the sea and strewed them over the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and about a day’s journey on that side, all around the camp, and some two cubits deep on the ground.

**(32) The people set to gathering quail all that day and night and all the next day – even he who gathered least had ten homers – and they spread them out all around the camp.**

**(33) The meat was still between their teeth, nor yet chewed, when the anger of the Lord blazed forth against the people and the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague.**

**(34) That place was named Kibroth-hattaavah, because the people who had the craving were buried there.**

**(35) Then the people set out from Kibroth-hattaavah for Hazereth. When they were in Hazereth,**

**(31) A wind from the Lord started up, swept quail from the sea:** Once again the Israelites in the wilderness are given quails for food. The first time this happened was immediately after the Exodus, when the Jews were hungry (Exod. 16:3, 8, 13) and they received quails together with the manna. At that time there were no negative consequences, since they really had no food, and their request was therefore justified. But now they have manna, and are not hungry. They are asking for meat only as a mere indulgence, for the satisfaction of a whim.

**And strewed them over the camp ... some two cubits deep on the ground:** Another possible translation is “they (the quails) were exhausted over the camp ... and flew at a height of two cubits above the ground.” Thus, it seemed that the birds were no longer able to maintain altitude because of their natural fatigue after flying over the sea. As it was so easy to catch them, the people believed that they had gotten food by their own efforts, instead of acknowledging it as a special endowment from the Almighty.

**(32) The people set to gathering quail all that day and night and all the next day:** They could not stop even during the night. Instead of sleeping, they gathered quails.

**Even he who gathered least had ten homers:** A *homer* is a measure of dry volume, equivalent to about 300 liters (273 dry quarts). They felt confident that the meat would suffice for an entire month, and God's promise was confirmed.

**And they spread them out all around the camp:** The purpose was to dry the quails in the sun, in order to take them along on the

journey as a ready food supply. But it also demonstrated that they were prepared to eat this same meat for an entire month.

**(33) The meat was still between their teeth, nor yet chewed, when the anger of the Lord blazed forth against the people:** Previously (see § 9.5 on Num. 11:20) they had been warned that the meat would in the end be harmful and disgusting to them. But because they did not heed the warning to desist from their lustful desires and complaints, the punishment now comes immediately, without waiting for them to consume the meat for the entire month.

**The meat was still between their teeth, nor yet chewed, when ... the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague:** From the text that follows it is clear that only a relatively small segment of the population was struck down in this plague. Perhaps the punishment of the most hardened offenders was carried out immediately for just this reason – so that the rest of the people would reconsider, refrain from eating the quails, and remain alive.

It would be wrong to think that the meat itself was poisonous or harmful. These people died simply because the quails as a food were physiologically unsuited to them.

A person who lusts for an excess indulgence must be able to eat and digest it, but the people were not prepared for that. Their request for meat – and even for it to have an additional, spicy savor – was not *per se* a bad thing – passions and desires are quite normal in the life of a person who is genuinely free. The problem here was that they yearned to return to Egyptian bondage, and that made their lusts and desires unacceptable.

Here we see the fatal contradiction. They desired to live an emotionally full life, but they also wanted to return to slavery. This was the reason for their inability to digest the meat they had received, and the cause of their death upon eating it. The food that nourishes a free people is fatal to slaves.

Thus, the people were shown that their pretensions to chutzpah were in this case misplaced.

**(34) That place was named Kibroth-hattaavah, because the people who had the craving were buried there:** The Hebrew name, which means “The Graves of Lust,” can be understood not only as the

graves of the lustful people, but also as the graves of the lust itself. Since their hunger for whims exceeded their ability to digest those whims, the lust was itself buried here. With this understanding, it was a clear sign that this generation will most likely not merit to enter the Land of Israel.

### § 9.7. MIRIAM AND AARON REBUKE MOSES (12:1-16)

א וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁהַ עַל־אֲדֹנָי הָאִשָּׁה הַכִּשִּׁיתָ אֲשֶׁר לָקַח  
ב כִּי־אִשָּׁה כִּשִּׁית לָקַח: ב וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרֵק אֶדְבַּר־בְּמִשְׁהַ דְּבַר יְיָ הֲלֹא גַם־בָּנֵינוּ  
דְּבַר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְיָ: ג וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו מְאֹד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי  
הָאֲדָמָה:

ד וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ פִתְאֹם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־מִרְיָם צֹאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁתֵּיכֶם  
אֶל־אֶהֱלֵ מוֹעֵד וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁתֵּיכֶם: ה וַיֵּרָד יְיָ בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן וַיַּעֲמֵד פֶּתַח  
הָאֶהֱלֵ וַיִּקְרָא אֶהֱרֹן וּמִרְיָם וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם: ו וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַעוּ־נָא דְבַר־יְיָ  
אִם־יְהִיֶה נְבִיאֵיכֶם יְיָ בַּמֶּרְאֶה אֲלֵיו אֲתוֹדַע בְּחֹלוֹם אֲדַבַּר־בוֹ: ז לֹא־  
כֵן עֲבַדְתִּי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל־בֵּיתִי נְאֻמָּן הוּא: ח פֹּה אֶל־פֶּה אֲדַבַּר־בוֹ וּמִרְאֶה  
וְלֹא בְחִיּוֹת וּתְמִנָּת יְיָ יִבִּיט וּמְדוּעַ לֹא יִרְאֶתֶם לְדַבֵּר בְּעַבְדֵי  
בְּמֹשֶׁה: ט וַיַּחֲרֹ־אֶף יְיָ בָּם וַיִּלְדָּ: י וְהָעֵנָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֶהֱלֵ וְהִנֵּה מִרְיָם  
מִצַּרְעַת כְּשִׁלְג וַיִּפֹּן אֶהֱרֹן אֶל־מִרְיָם וְהִנֵּה מִצַּרְעַת: יא וַיֹּאמֶר אֶהֱרֹן  
אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בִּי אֲדֹנָי אֶל־נָא תִשֶׁת עָלֵינוּ חַטָּאת אֲשֶׁר נִזְאַלְנוּ וְאֲשֶׁר  
חָטָאנוּ: יב אֶל־נָא תְהִי כַּמֶּת אֲשֶׁר בְּצִאתוֹ מִרְחֹם אִמּוֹ וַיֵּאָכֵל חֲצִי  
בְּשָׂרוֹ: יג וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְיָ לֵאמֹר אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ:

יד וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאַבְיָה יָרֵק יָרֵק בְּפִנְיָהּ הֲלֹא תִכְלֵם שְׁבַעַת יָמִים  
תִּסְגָּר שְׁבַעַת יָמִים מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וְאַחַר תִּאָּסֵף: טו וַתִּסְגָּר מִרְיָם מִחוּץ  
לַמַּחֲנֶה שְׁבַעַת יָמִים וְהָעַם לֹא נָסַע עַד־הָאָסֵף מִרְיָם: טז וְאַחַר נָסְעוּ  
הָעַם מִחֲצָרוֹת וַיַּחֲנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר פָּאֲרוֹן:

(1) Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: “He married a Cushite woman!”

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- (2) They said, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?" The Lord heard it.
- (3) Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth.
- (4) Suddenly the Lord called to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the Tent of Meeting." So the three of them went out.
- (5) The Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, stopped at the entrance of the Tent, and called out, "Aaron and Miriam!" The two of them came forward;
- (6) and He said, "Hear these My words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream.
- (7) Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household.
- (8) With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!"
- (9) Still incensed with them, the Lord departed.
- (10) As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales! When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with scales.
- (11) And Aaron said to Moses, "O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly.
- (12) Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away."
- (13) So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, "O God, pray heal her!"
- (14) But the Lord said to Moses, "If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted."
- (15) So Miriam was shut out of camp seven days; and the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted.
- (16) After that the people set out from Hazeroth and encamped in the wilderness of Paran.

(1) Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses: Because Miriam was the initiator of the protest, she is mentioned first. For the same reason, it is Miriam who will later be punished.

Miriam's activity is mentioned in the Torah only a few times, but each time her influence is substantial.<sup>43</sup>

In particular, the beginning of the book of Exodus (2:1 ff.) recounts how, after Pharaoh had issued a decree that all male Jewish newborns should be killed, Miriam kept watch over a basket containing her infant brother Moses, whom their mother had placed in the reeds on the banks of the Nile.

When Pharaoh's daughter, who happened to be walking on the riverbank, found the basket and retrieved the child from the river, Miriam proposed to her that a wet nurse for the child be sought from among the Jewish women. Her proposal was accepted, and the wet nurse whom Miriam had in mind turned out to be none other than Moses' very own mother Jochebed. In this way, Moses was brought safely back to his family.

The Midrash adds that Miriam's father Amram had estranged himself from her mother in connection with the persecution of the Jews in Egypt, and the threat of babies perishing by drowning in the Nile under Pharaoh's decree. Amram felt very strongly that bearing more children under such circumstances was completely unjustifiable. Only Miriam was able to convince her father otherwise and bring her

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<sup>43</sup> Miriam led the women in songs and dances of gratitude to God at the Sea of Reeds (Exod. 15:20).

According to Tradition, the Israelites in the wilderness drew water from a well, "Miriam's well," which in her merit miraculously accompanied them everywhere throughout their wilderness journey.

Miriam was married to Caleb, the son of Jephunneh, of the tribe of Judah. Caleb was among the most distinguished men of that prominent tribe. Miriam bore him a son, Hur, who together with Joshua supported Moses in the war with Amalek (Exod. 17:10), and is reported to have been slain by the mob when he opposed the creation of the golden calf (see *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 27.2). His grandson (Miriam's great-grandson) Bezalel was hand-picked by God to be the chief architect of the Tabernacle and its vessels, and especially the Ark of the Covenant (Exod. 31:1 ff.).

parents back together. Moses was then conceived and born as the result of that reunion.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, Miriam is quite active socially, and is especially sensitive to family issues and problems.

**Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: “He married a Cushite woman!”**: This verse is often translated as: “Miriam and Aaron slandered Moses regarding the Ethiopian wife he had married, for he had married an Ethiopian woman.” That is, according to that translation Miriam and Aaron are rebuking Moses for taking another wife for himself in addition to the wife he already had, Zipporah. (Whenever Kush is mentioned in the Torah, it usually means Ethiopia.)

However, Jewish tradition maintains that Miriam and Aaron’s rebuke concerned not an additional wife, but Zipporah herself, Moses’ only wife, who was a Midianite. (Midian is also called Kushan, see Hab. 3:7.) Thus, according to this tradition, Miriam rebuked Moses not for taking an additional wife, but for leaving Zipporah, the wife he already had.

The Midrash, seeing a connection between this passage and the incident of the prophecy of the prophet-elders that preceded it, says that Miriam had been with Zipporah when Moses was informed that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp. Upon hearing that, Zipporah exclaimed: “Woe to the wives of those who prophesy, for they will distance themselves from their wives, just as my husband has removed himself from me!” Thus, Miriam learned the details of Moses family life only by happenstance, and she was outraged. Miriam then brought the situation to the attention of her brother Aaron, and urged him to speak out against Moses’ behavior.

**(2) They said, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?”**: Miriam and Aaron took as a given that the endowment of prophecy in no way required a prophet to abstain from intimate relations in marriage. After all, although both Miriam and Aaron were themselves prophets, they saw no reason whatsoever to leave their spouses.

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<sup>44</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 4.1.

The Midrash explains Moses' separation from his wife, and the meaning of the rebuke, as follows.

Just before the giving of the Torah there was a general instruction to all men to distance themselves from their wives for three days (Exod. 19:15). Then, when the giving of the Torah was complete, God told Moses, "Go, say to [the people], 'Return [now] to your tents.' But you remain here with Me" (Deut. 5:27). That is, the entire nation, after receiving the Divine revelation, were ordered to return to normal family life; only Moses was told to remain in constant contact with God, with the implication that he alone should not return to his wife.

Thus God was saying to Moses, as it were: "I need you to be available to communicate with me at any moment." Moses must never be distracted from his dialogue with God by engaging in an ongoing, regular dialogue with anyone else. Therefore, he cannot be with a woman, or even remain with his own wife.

In light of all of the above, and at God's direction, Moses did not return to Zipporah. Why then did this occasion so much resentment in Miriam?

As the Midrash explains it, Miriam was saying to Moses: "The reality is that God will most typically demand from a person that which the person wants for himself. God leads a person along the very path that he himself chooses. If God is telling you not to return to your wife, it is clearly because you are yourself inclined toward such excessive distancing – *perishut*, 'asceticism.' Therefore, it is only you, Moses, who are to blame for having left your wife, and this is the essence of my rebuke."

Thus, Miriam felt convinced that Moses left his wife by his own choosing.

**(3) Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth:** In Moses, the attribute of *anavah*, "humility," completely dominates.

This verse is usually understood to mean that Moses, being so very humble, would not respond to the reproach of Miriam and Aaron, and the Almighty Himself therefore interceded on Moses' behalf. However, we will soon offer a completely different interpretation of this passage, in the manner that Rabbi A. I. Kook understands it.

**(4) Suddenly the Lord called to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam: God revealed himself to them under unusual and unexpected circumstances. The Midrash elaborates:** God called to Aaron and Miriam at that moment when they were engaged in intimate relations with their spouses. As they were unclean just then because of copulation, they shouted: “Water, water!” in response to God’s unexpected call, and in order to cleanse themselves. Thus did God demonstrate to Aaron and Miriam that there was a certain logic and purpose to Moses’ separating from his wife, because the Almighty could appear to him literally at any moment.

**(5) The Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, stopped at the entrance of the Tent, and called out, “Aaron and Miriam!” The two of them came forward:** The Midrash explains that God held this conversation with Aaron and Miriam apart from Moses, because “no more than half a person’s praise should be uttered in his presence” (referring to Num. 12:7-8). Moreover, it was so that Moses would not hear the reproach directed at Aaron. We can also understand that the purpose of the Almighty’s conversation with Aaron and Miriam was to correct their wrongdoings, and it is much easier for a person to admit his mistakes when he or she is confronted with them while no strangers are present.

**(6) And He said, “Hear these My words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream:** An ordinary prophet is not able to conduct a dialogue with God while in a wakeful state, precisely because the “I” of the prophet, just like that of any other person, cannot withstand an open dialogue with God.

**(7) Not so with My servant Moses:** The situation is different with Moses, who is “My servant.” That is, being at the level of complete submission, he has no personal predispositions of his own. Moses’ status is different from that of an ordinary prophet. And if not for that difference, Miriam’s logic would have been correct.

God’s response also shows that Miriam’s arguments are *per se* valid and significant. For anyone else but Moses, separating from one’s wife for spiritual advancement would be wrong.

**He is trusted throughout My household:** In this aspect Moses is contrasted with all other prophets, who receive prophecy “in a vision ... in a dream,” while Moses receives his prophecy lucidly and in a state of full consciousness. Therefore, the words “he is trusted throughout My household” should not be understood in the sense that Moses, whom God trusts implicitly, has unlimited access to all the Almighty’s secrets (because we know that it is not so, from the fact that God declined to reveal His “Presence” to Moses, see Exod. 33:20). Rather, it means that Moses is faithful and reliable, and can be trusted in all of God’s “household” matters – that is, in everything related to the Torah, which was given through him.

Moses conveys God’s word to the people with absolute precision, introducing no changes or additions of his own. It is in this sense that the Talmud calls Moses’ level of prophecy “perfectly transparent glass,”<sup>45</sup> unlike other prophets, whose prophecies are at the level of “unclear glass.” Moses has no personal motives in his prophecy, his prophecy is fully “transparent,” which is what gives the text of the Torah an incomparably higher status in comparison with the texts of other prophetic books. And this special ability of Moses is based on the very quality of *anavah*, humility, an attribute that is a sine qua non for any student who properly wishes to assimilate his teacher’s lessons.

**(8) With him I speak mouth to mouth:** This is the level of dialogue when both sides deliberate over a problem, in contrast to where one side speaks and the other merely perceives. Other prophets too engaged in a dialogue with God and even argued with him, but at the actual moment of the prophecy, they only perceived what the Almighty wished to convey to them.

**Plainly and not in riddles:** Not in mysterious dreams that need to be deciphered, as it is with other prophets. Therefore, God can convey

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<sup>45</sup> The Talmud (Yebamot 49b) uses the word *ispaklarya* (Latin, *specularia*, “mirror like”) to describe this phenomenon. In a later period the same word came to mean a mirror, but in this case it means window-glass. By describing Moses’ level of prophecy as *ispaklarya me’ira*, “clear glass,” Tradition is saying that Moses had a “transparent window” through which he saw with absolute clarity what the Almighty was showing him and teaching him.

through Moses the level of “legislative text,” which must be lucid and decisive. This is unlike the other prophets, through whom general ideas and concepts are transmitted, but which always have a bleary or blurred appearance.

**And he beholds the likeness of the Lord:** Other prophets too (Isaiah and Ezekiel, for example) have a “vision of the appearance of the Almighty.” but only Moses’ vision of Him is lucid and true to reality. From the book of Exodus (33:23) we know that “God’s face” that Moses saw was a “view from behind,” that is, an *ex post facto* understanding of the workings of Divine Providence. Nevertheless, this is the very highest level of comprehension that any human being can attain.

**How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!:** How could you fail to realize that Moses’ prophetic gifts differ from the prophetic abilities of all other prophets, such that you apply to him only the usual, ordinary criteria?

**(9) Still incensed with them, the Lord departed:** I.e., He ceased communicating with them, as if to say: “If you cannot understand the difference between yourselves and Moses, then you simply don’t deserve to be prophets.”

**(10) As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales!** This disease, *tzara’at*, often wrongly translated as “leprosy,” is in the Torah always the consequence of vile speech.<sup>46</sup> Miriam is here punished for having slandered Moses, notwithstanding that she spoke sincerely and not maliciously. An additional reason for Miriam’s leprosy is that the Almighty “departed” from Miriam and Aaron. This loss of holiness, and of the level of prophecy, is a loss of vitality, and in a certain sense a form of death, which is the very root of impurity. Given the lofty spiritual level at which Miriam normally operates, this impurity manifests as *tzara’at*.

**When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with scales:** Miriam contracted *tzara’at*, because she was the initiator of that speech, while Aaron was only her adjunct in that dishonorable undertaking. Aaron himself is not punished, because he is the High Priest, and if he were to be afflicted with *tzara’at*, he

<sup>46</sup> See § 5.2 above.

could not serve in the Tabernacle. However, Miriam will be restored to normal society after healing.

**(11) And Aaron said to Moses, “O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly:** Since our sin was the consequence of a mistake that we now admit, we ask that you not blame us for it.

**(14) But the Lord said to Moses, “If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days?:** God’s analogy is indicative of Miriam’s exalted level: The Almighty relates to her like a father to a daughter.

**Would she not bear her shame for seven days?** Seven days is the minimum integral unit of time for achieving a given, non-trivial objective.

**Let her be shut out of camp for seven days:** Seven days is also the standard interval for purification from *tzara’at* (Lev. 14:1 ff.). But in this case, Miriam does not have the true status of a *metzora’at*, “a woman afflicted with *tzara’at*,” because that would require the formal declaration of a priest, which did not happen here. Because Miriam is only a quasi-*metzora’at*, the period of her removal from the camp must be explicitly prescribed.

**And then let her be readmitted:** That is, upon Miriam’s return to the camp she will be restored to her former status. Because Miriam’s intentions were noble, her punishment was only temporary and did not entail further consequences.

**(15) So Miriam was shut out of camp seven days; and the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted:** The Midrash sees here not just mercy, but justice. Miriam had stood motionless so many years ago to see what would happen to the infant Moses when he was lowered into the Nile in a basket, as we read: “And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him” (Exod. 2:4). And commensurately, the Almighty would not signal the Israelites to break camp until Miriam was fully healed and restored to them.

**“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses”:  
Rabbi A. I. Kook’s Interpretation**

As already noted in our opening commentary to weekly portion *Behaalotecha*, Rabbi A. I. Kook’s interpretation of this entire episode differs from the conventionally accepted one. Rabbi Kook believes that Moses’ problem was his excessive *anavah*, his unadulterated humility. Although that character trait was an absolute prerequisite for Moses to be worthy of receiving the Torah, it also rendered Moses ineligible to become a *Mashiach*, “a Messiah,” because *chutzpah* is essential for that role. And this meant that Moses could not enter the Land of Israel, and had to die in the wilderness.

Because Miriam and Aaron are fundamentally and profoundly connected to Moses, and they cannot lead the people except in a triumvirate with him, we can say that consequently they simply cannot live without Moses. Which means that they and their entire generation likewise will die in the wilderness, if they cannot reverse the status quo.<sup>47</sup>

Upon seeing that Moses supported the prophecy of Eldad and Medad – that is, he acknowledged the legitimacy of their *chutzpah* – Miriam and Aaron concluded that Moses’ position was in fact amenable to change. They then rushed in with a daring and rash attempt to overturn the impending sentence.

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<sup>47</sup> Although, according to the Midrash, the prophecy of Eldad and Medad included a prediction that Moses would die in the wilderness, we need not interpret that prediction as inexorably final. It is in the nature of any prophecy to speak, in general terms, of only various possible eventualities, while the actual outcome will depend on the course of action ultimately adopted by the person or persons to whom (or about whom) the prophecy was given.

We see a classic example of this in the book of Jonah. When the inhabitants of Nineveh modified their behavior in response to Jonah’s prophecy, their fate changed accordingly, and the prophecy itself was then read differently from how it had been originally intended.

Seen in this light, Eldad and Medad’s prophecy that Moses would die in the wilderness did not discourage Miriam and Aaron from their attempts to redirect the situation, and in fact only strengthened their resolve.

When Miriam came to know that Moses had separated from his wife, she took it upon herself to correct the situation by returning her brother to the fullness of family life. For it is obvious that the family connection, and sexual relations in particular, which are fundamentally associated with the birth of new life, are among the factors that most decisively determine whether a person is indeed living life to its fullest.

Miriam and Aaron were hoping that through their actions they could restore to Moses – and to themselves and to that entire generation as well – the opportunity to enter the Land of Israel.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the Torah’s statement, “Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth” is intended to explain not only the reason for God’s subsequent actions (Moses is too humble to come to his own defense, and the Almighty must therefore intercede on his behalf), but also the reason behind Miriam and Aaron’s actions. Namely: because Moses’ humility was threatening Aaron and Miriam (and indeed the entire generation) with death in the wilderness, which would deprive them of any possibility of entering the Land of Israel, they came out in full opposition to Moses’ hallmark character trait – that humility itself.

But God responds to them that Moses’ prophecy has an entirely different character from that of all other prophets, and Moses’ *anavah* is therefore indispensable to him. The reason that Moses cannot advance to the level of *chutzpah* is not any shortcoming in Moses himself, but the fact that the people themselves are unprepared for their mission.

Essentially, Miriam and Aaron wanted to charge Moses and the people with a task that was beyond their reach, a task for which neither Moses nor the people were ready.

Moses was a supremely great man, but even such a man has his limits. The revelation at Sinai was the apex of his accomplishments,

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<sup>48</sup> The idea that the Jewish people’s connection to the Land of Israel can be compared to that of husband and wife is very well established in classical Jewish tradition.

Seen in this light, Eldad and Medad’s prophecy that Moses would die in the wilderness did not discourage Miriam and Aaron from their attempts to redirect the situation, and in fact only strengthened their resolve.

but it was only the beginning of Moses' many great achievements. His perception of the world was somewhat more heavenly than earthly. He separated from his wife. He subsisted perfectly well on manna and had no need for meat. But having rejected all passions, he had no proper understanding of people, nor could he lead them in critical situations.

The next weekly portion, *Sh'lach*, tells the story of the sin of the spies, which only revealed a condition that already existed – the fact that the people (and Moses himself, too) were unprepared to conquer and possess the Land.



**WEEKLY  
PORTION 4**

**SH'LACH**



## § 10. THE SENDING OF THE SPIES

### § 10.1. DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE INCIDENT OF THE SPIES

Weekly portion *Sh'lach* and the episode of the spies are perceived differently among the various Jewish movements of our age. Each of these varying interpretations connects the story with a different aspect of Jewish life.

When this weekly portion is studied in *Haredi*, “ultra-Orthodox” circles, the focus is mainly on the prohibitions of slander and other forms of “vile speech,” the sin for which the spies were severely punished. They also stress the obligation of unquestioning obedience to God, because the people’s demand to send the spies evinced a lack of faith in the omnipotence of the Creator. It is acknowledged, however, that the people were to blame for this, not Moses.

But when this section is studied in religious-Zionist circles, the emphasis is different. It is on the refusal to conquer and possess the Land of Israel, which is seen as an egregious sin that threatens the very existence of the Jewish people. The story of the spies is about twelve truly outstanding representatives of the Jewish people, “all the men being leaders of the Israelites” (Num. 13:3), ten of whom oppose possessing the land, while only two are in favor. And all this in the generation of the Exodus, whom God had ordered explicitly to conquer and possess the land!

It is hardly surprising then, that when Zionism emerged in the nineteenth century, most of the leading rabbis opposed it, taking

the same position that the majority of the spies had embraced three millennia earlier.

We will also consider this story as it relates to the relationship between “supernatural” – or “miraculous” – holiness, and “natural” holiness.

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The great Gaon of Vilna used to say that during the *geulah*, “the Messianic redemption,” the sin of the spies will be repeated, and would primarily affect the *talmidei chachamim*, “the Torah sages.” Rabbi Eliyahu Guttmacher<sup>49</sup> writes as well that in the matter of returning to the Land of Israel, Satan afflicts many Jews, and the Torah sages in particular.

Why do so many outstanding Torah sages succumb to Satan’s influence and resist Zionism? One reason is that these sages are spiritual people, even in the extreme, and spiritual people always have difficulty realizing and actualizing ideas, because the results are always (but especially at first) very imperfect. It is difficult for a spiritual person to come to terms with such imperfection, even when it is only temporary.

*Galut*, “exile” finds expression not only in the literal, physical sense, when Jews live beyond the borders of their land, but also in the psychological and spiritual spheres. We see this, in particular, in the fact that during such periods of exile, naturalness and normal behavior are driven out of the life of the nation. The people and especially their sages accustom themselves to focusing on what they perceive as higher-level concerns; the Land of Israel then seems to them far too mundane a reality to deserve their serious attention. In *galut*, the intellectuals sit in the yeshivah, which they view as the highest attainable spiritual level. To relocate themselves to Israel would in their eyes be a decline and a degradation, which simply cannot be allowed.

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<sup>49</sup> Eliyahu Guttmacher (1796-1874, Poland), a prominent rabbi of the mid-nineteenth century, was among the first to formulate an ideology of religious Zionism.

The second reason why the majority of *galut* leadership, including the Torah sages, oppose Zionism is that the nature of leadership will inevitably change in the Land of Israel, and the leaders of the previous generation are resisting the coming change of elites.

In view of all this they often fail to assign any importance whatsoever to the idea of *aliyah*, even when life in *galut* has already become genuinely perilous.

There are two types of sin with respect to time. The first of those is the sin of premature anticipation, impatience, impetuosity. The sin of the golden calf was this kind of sin. The people, believing that they had lost their leader (Moses) who was their connection to the Almighty, demanded an immediate resolution to their problem. If Moses was not coming back, then let there be at least the golden calf. God largely forgave that generation for their sin, because the calf they had made was ultimately a manifestation of their commitment to holiness, notwithstanding that they had expressed that commitment in an entirely improper form.

## § 10.2. MOSES SENDS SPIES TO SCOUT THE LAND (13:1-20)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב שְׁלַח־לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיֵּתְרוּ אֶת־אֶרֶץ  
 כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר־אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אֶחָד אִישׁ אֶחָד לְמַטֵּה אֲבֹתָיו  
 תְּשַׁלְּחוּ כָל גִּשְׁיָא בְהֵם: ג וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה מִמִּדְבַּר פָּאָרָן עַל־פִּי יְיָ  
 כָּלֶם אַנְשִׁים רָאשֵׁי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה: ד וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹתָם לְמַטֵּה רְאוּבֵן  
 שְׁמוּעַ בֶּן־זִכְוֹר: ה לְמַטֵּה שְׁמֵעוֹן שִׁפְטַט בֶּן־חֹרִי: ו לְמַטֵּה יְהוּדָה כָּלָב  
 בֶּן־יִפְנָה: ז לְמַטֵּה יִשָּׁשׁוּר יִגָּאֵל בֶּן־יֹוסֵף: ח לְמַטֵּה אֶפְרָיִם הוֹשֵׁעַ  
 בֶּן־נוּן: ט לְמַטֵּה בִנְיָמִן פִּלְטִי בֶן־רְפוּא: י לְמַטֵּה זְבוּלֹן גְּדִיאֵל בֶּן־  
 סוּדִי: יא לְמַטֵּה יוֹסֵף מְנַשֶּׁה גְּדִי בֶן־סוּסִי: יב לְמַטֵּה דָן עַמִּיאֵל  
 בֶּן־גַּמְלִי: יג לְמַטֵּה אֲשֶׁר סִתּוֹר בֶּן־מִיכָאֵל: יד לְמַטֵּה נַפְתָּלִי נַחֲבִי בֶן־  
 וּפְסִי: טו לְמַטֵּה גָד גֵּאוּאֵל בֶּן־מְכִי: טז אֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־שְׁלַח  
 מֹשֶׁה לְתוֹר אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לְהוֹשֵׁעַ בֶּן־נוּן יְהוֹשֻׁעַ: יז וַיִּשְׁלַח  
 אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה לְתוֹר אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם עַל־זֶה בָּנִיגַב וְעַלִּיתֶם  
 אֶת־הַהָר: יח וְרֵאִיתֶם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ מִה־הוּא וְאֶת־הָעֵם הַיֹּשֵׁב עָלֶיהָ  
 הַחֹזֵק הוּא הַרְפָּה הַמְקֻט הוּא אִסְרָב: יט וַיִּמָּה הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־הוּא

יֹשֵׁב בְּהַר הַטּוֹבָה הוּא אִם-רָעָה וְיִמָּה הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר-הוּא יוֹשֵׁב בְּהַר הַטּוֹבָה  
הַבְּמִחְנִים אִם בְּמִבְצָרִים: כּוּמָה הָאָרֶץ הַשְּׂמֹנֶה הִוא אִם-רְזָה הַיִּשְׁ-  
בָּה עַל אִם-אֵין וְהַתְּחִזְקֹתֶם וְלִמְחַתֶּם מִפְּרִי הָאָרֶץ וְהַיְמִים יָמֵי בְּבוֹרֵי  
עֲנָבִים:

- (1) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying,**
- (2) **“Send men to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelite people; send one man from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chieftain among them.”**
- (3) **So Moses, by the Lord’s command, sent them out from the wilderness of Paran, all the men being leaders of the Israelites.**
- (4) **And these were their names: From the tribe of Reuben, Shammua son of Zaccur.**
- (5) **From the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat son of Hori.**
- (6) **From the tribe of Judah, Caleb son of Jephunneh.**
- (7) **From the tribe of Issachar, Igal son of Joseph.**
- (8) **From the tribe of Ephraim, Hosea son of Nun.**
- (9) **From the tribe of Benjamin, Palti son of Rafu.**
- (10) **From the tribe of Zebulun, Gaddiel son of Sodi.**
- (11) **From the tribe of Joseph, namely, the tribe of Manasseh, Gaddi son of Susi.**
- (12) **From the tribe of Dan, Ammiel son of Gemalli.**
- (13) **From the tribe of Asher, Sethur son of Michael.**
- (14) **From the tribe of Naphtali, Nahbi son of Vophsi.**
- (15) **From the tribe of Gad, Geuel son of Machi.**
- (16) **Those were the names of the men whom Moses sent to scout the land; but Moses changed the name of Hosea son of Nun to Joshua.**
- (17) **When Moses sent them to scout the land of Canaan, he said to them, “Go up there into the Negeb and on into the hill country,**
- (18) **and see what kind of country it is. Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many?**

(19) **Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified?**

(20) **Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not? And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land.” – Now it happened to be the season of the first ripe grapes.**

**(1) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: The incident of the spies is recounted twice in the Torah:** here, in the book of Numbers, and again in Deuteronomy (1:22 ff.), where it is presented as a retrospect – Moses recalling past events. In our commentary on Deuteronomy, we will present a comprehensive comparison of the two versions. Here we will mention only a few of the most significant differences.

**The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Send men”:** The opening words of this story give the impression that the initiative for sending spies came from God. However, in the retrospect given in the book of Deuteronomy the same story looks completely different: “Then all of you came to me and said, ‘Let us send men ahead to reconnoiter the land for us.’” That is, it was the initiative of the people. The synthesis of these stories follows the approach that “a person is led in the direction in which he wishes to go.” Because Moses and the people were looking for excuses not to go to conquer and possess the land, God afforded them the opportunity to move in that direction.

**Send men:** The Hebrew is *sh’lach lecha* – literally, “send for yourself,” a fairly uncommon phraseology.<sup>50</sup> The Midrash therefore understands it to mean: “Send them for your own sake, if you require it for your own purposes, in order to clarify something in your own mind.”

**One man from each of their ancestral tribes:** Quite obviously, the objective here is not merely to gather military intelligence, for which it would be enough to send a small number of professional scouts, as Joshua did later (Josh. 2:1 ff.). Nor could the sending of the spies have been economically motivated, for that intelligence too

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<sup>50</sup> We find an analogous phrasing in the words *lech lecha*, lit., “go for yourself,” with which God addresses Abraham at the onset of his mission (Gen. 12:1), and then again in the opening passage of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:2).

would have been superfluous. Since Canaan at that time still fell under Egypt's sphere of influence, Moses and these leaders of the Israelite tribes, who had been educated by the Egyptians, certainly knew what the land was like. (This is also evident from the fact that the spies demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the geography of the land.) The purpose of scouting the land was not merely to gather information, but something more substantial, in the manner of a "dry run" for conquering and possessing the land. Thus, each tribe needed its own trusted representative who would see the land through the eyes of his respective tribe.

**Each one a chieftain among them:** Each of the spies was a leader of his tribe, a person of authority and responsibility.

**(3) So Moses, by the Lord's command, sent them out from the wilderness of Paran:** From Moses perspective, everything here is happening by God's command. There is not even the slightest hint that the spies were sent as the response to a request by the people, which is how this event is presented in the book of Deuteronomy. Evidently, Moses in his final years reconsidered the entire incident, and concluded that the spies had in fact been sent to address a need of the people.

(4) And these were their names: These are not the chieftains of the tribes that were enumerated in the opening chapter of this book (Num. 1:15). Rather, these spies are a younger group of leaders, the "future leaders" of that period. When it later turns out that even they are incapable of conquering and possessing the land, this can only mean that their entire generation is similarly unqualified, and must be replaced.

**(16) But Moses changed the name of Hosea son of Nun to Joshua:** *Hosea* means "he was saved," but *Joshua* means "the Lord will save (you)." This renaming actually happened much earlier (Exod. 33:11), but its meaning and significance become evident only here in the context of the sending of the spies.

And yet, Moses did not rename Caleb or any other member of the expedition, which tells us that only with Joshua was there the potential for a problem. Perhaps it was that Joshua was Moses' closest disciple, and, as noted earlier, the conquering and possessing the land is an especially acute challenge for the Torah sages.

**(17) Go up there into the Negeb and on into the hill country:**

That is, go directly into the land, from the south (where the Israelites were then located, and whence the spies departed), giving special attention the hill country, i.e., the central mountain range.

Thirty-nine years later, even after all their wilderness wanderings were behind them, the Israelites could still not follow this same straight path. (Apparently, even among the next generation the traumatic memories of this initial failure were still too keenly felt.) Instead, they bypassed the promised land and instead entered it from the east, from the direction of the Jordan River crossing, near Jericho .

**(18) And see what kind of country it is ... the people who dwell in it:** Examine the connection of the land to its people, and see how it feels to you. That is, get a sense of what it means to actually live in that land.

**(20) And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land.":** The Hebrew here for "take pains" is *ve-hit-chazaktem*, "be strong, be of good courage." Since this had to be explicitly stressed, we can infer that bringing back such fruits entailed particular difficulty.

Moses knew well, of course, that the fruits of the land were freakishly large. Thus, the strength he encouraged them to have can refer to the physical challenges of carrying such huge fruit back to the camp in Kadesh, or to the spiritual difficulty of experiencing life in such an abnormal land.

Such enormous fruit shows that this land has a supernatural character. Moses initially focuses not on the natural conquest of the land, but on its miraculous aspects, and he therefore believes that such gigantic fruit, rather than being perceived as a problem, will only help to demonstrate clearly to the people the kind of miracles that they should expect.

To that extent, however, there was in fact an internal contradiction in the entire enterprise. The need to send the spies at all, presupposed that the relationship between the people and the land would be a natural one. However, if everything was meant to be accomplished through miracles, why must spies be sent to see anything? This internal contradiction was the very reason that the mission was doomed to fail.

## § 10.3. THEY WENT UP AND SCOUTED THE LAND (13:21-25)

כא וַיַּעֲלוּ וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ מִמִּדְבַּר־צֵן עַד־רֶחֶב לְבָא חֲמַת׃ כב וַיַּעֲלוּ  
 בְּנֵי־בְנֵי־אֵל עַד־חֶבְרוֹן וְשָׁם אַחִימָן שֵׁשַׁי וְתַלְמִי יְלִידֵי הָעֵנֶק וְחֶבְרוֹן  
 שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים נִבְנְתָה לְפָנָי צֵעֵן מִצְרַיִם׃ כג וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־נַחַל אֶשְׁכּוֹל וַיְכַרְתּוּ  
 מִשָּׁם זְמוּרָה וְאֶשְׁכּוֹל עֲנָבִים אֶחָד וַיִּשְׂאֵהוּ בְמוֹט בְּשָׁנָיִם וּמִן־הַרְמֹנִים  
 וּמִן־הַתְּאֵנִים׃ כד לַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא קָרָא נַחַל אֶשְׁכּוֹל עַל אֲדוּת הָאֶשְׁכּוֹל  
 אֲשֶׁר־כָּרְתּוּ מִשָּׁם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃ כה וַיָּשִׁבוּ מִתּוֹר הָאָרֶץ מִקֶּץ אַרְבָּעִים  
 יוֹם׃

(21) They went up and scouted the land, from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, at Lebo-hamath.

(22) They went up into the Negeb and came to Hebron, where lived Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the Anakites. – Now Hebron was founded seven years before Zoan of Egypt. –

(23) They reached the wadi Eshcol, and there they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes – it had to be borne on a carrying frame by two of them – and some pomegranates and figs.

(24) That place was named the wadi Eshcol because of the cluster that the Israelites cut down there.

(25) At the end of forty days they returned from scouting the land.

(21) **From the wilderness of Zin:** This is the southern border of Canaan.

**To Rehob, at Lebo-hamath:** An alternate translation of *Lebo-hamath* is “on the road to Hamath.” Rehob is located in the north, in the foothills of Mount Hermon, and next to it lies the road to Hamath – a passage through the mountains between the spurs of Hermon and the Mount Lebanon range.

**Lebo-hamath:** The northernmost point of the Holy Land, in the Lebanon region.

**(22) They went up into the Negeb and came to Hebron:** *Va-ya'alu*, “they went up” is in the plural, but *va yavo*, “came to” (lit., “he came to”) is in the singular. The Midrash comments on this grammatical irregularity that only Caleb actually reached Hebron, where he prayed at the Cave of Machpelah, the tomb of the Patriarchs, for strength to properly execute and complete his commission. None of the other spies reached Hebron.

This relates to what the Torah says later, “None except Caleb son of Jephunneh shall see it, and to him and his descendants will I give the land on which he set foot, because he remained loyal to the Lord” (Deut. 1:36). And to what we read in Judges (1:20) “They gave Hebron to Caleb, as Moses had promised.” Only a connection with the ancestors of the Jewish people can afford their descendants sufficient strength to conquer the Land of Israel – in a situation where, from a solely natural perspective, such a conquest seems virtually impossible.

**Where lived Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the Anakites:** Literally, “the children of Anak.” *Anak*, which in Hebrew means “giant,” can in this verse be understood as a proper name, or as describing the characteristics of Hebron’s inhabitants in general.

Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai are most likely the names of clans. In the book of Joshua (15:14) these same names identify tribes that inhabited particular territories.

**Now Hebron was founded seven years before Zoan of Egypt:** Seven is a typological number for cycles of time; thus, we need not understand these seven years literally. This verse is telling us that Hebron, the ancient capital of the Land of Israel, was founded significantly earlier than Zoan, the ancient capital of Egypt and residence of the pharaohs. Thus, the Land of Israel is an order of magnitude more influential and more firmly established than Egypt.

**They cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes – it had to be borne on a carrying frame by two of them:** The Torah is here reporting that they followed Moses’ instructions: “And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land” (Num. 13:20). This image of the spies carrying a huge bunch of grapes on a carrying frame has become a symbol of the unusual fertility of the Land of Israel, and at the same time a symbol of its abnormality.

**(23-24) They reached the wadi Eshcol ...** That place was named **the wadi Eshcol because of the cluster that the Israelites cut down there:** *Eshcol* (or *eshkol*) is the Hebrew word for “a cluster of grapes.” But actually, we have already seen this name much earlier in the Torah, among Abraham's allies: “Aner, Eshkol and Mamre – let them take their share” (Gen. 14:13). These men lived in the area of Hebron, whence we can surmise that this place must have been called Eshkol even long before the spies visited it and sampled its grapes. Such “rethinking” of already-existing place names is not uncommon in Scripture.

#### § 10.4. A LAND FLOWING WITH MILK AND HONEY (13:26-27)

כּוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־כָּל־עֵדֻת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־  
מִדְבַּר פָּאָרָן קְדֻשָּׁה וַיֵּשִׁיבוּ אֹתָם דְּבַר וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעֵדָה וַיִּרְאוּם אֶת־  
פְּרֵי הָאָרֶץ: כּוּ וַיִּסְפְּרוּ־לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ בָּאנוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחְתָּנוּ וְגַם  
זָבַת חֵלֶב וּדְבַשׁ הִוא וְזֶה־פְרִיָּהּ:

**(26) They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran, and they made their report to them and to the whole community, as they showed them the fruit of the land.**

**(27) This is what they told him: “We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.**

**(27) It does indeed flow with milk and honey:** The description of the Land of Israel as “a land flowing with milk and honey” is first found in the book of Exodus: “I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:8). The spies are here confirming the fulfillment of that Divine promise.

However, defining the land as flowing with milk and honey, in addition to the obvious meaning of a rich and successful land, also expresses another of its essential characteristics, as we shall now explain. These two foods, milk and honey, while both kosher, are somewhat unusual in that regard.

Milk is obtained from the udder of an animal, which is itself a combination of milk and meat, two substances which according to Jewish law must never be combined. Thus, it is as if from something non-kosher – or something “*not quite kosher*” – we get a substance (milk) that turns out to be completely kosher.

And the same applies to honey. A general principle of *kashrut* states that anything obtained from a non-kosher animal is deemed non-kosher. With the exception of four species of locusts, all insects are not kosher. Now, bees are insects, and therefore not kosher, and yet honey itself is kosher. And all this notwithstanding that when bees produce honey, in addition to the pollen that they collect from plants, they also add to that honey secretions from their very own glands. (Note: The word *devash*, “honey,” in Tanakh can refer generally to any thick, sticky, sweet liquid, most typically either fruit juice, particularly that of dates, or bee honey; see Jud. 14:8.)

Thus, both milk and honey are apparently violations of the general principle of “kosher derived from non-kosher.” And this in fact is one of Land of Israel’s most important qualities, that it has the power to render kosher whatever non-kosher might be found within it.

When something improper enters the land, it is given an opportunity for correction. If the Jewish people aspire to come to their land even on incorrect premises – as in the case of non-religious Zionism in its various aspects, for example – this deficiency will be gradually corrected, and so will the correct Zionism eventually be obtained from its earlier, improper variant.

**And this is its fruit:** This country is abnormal. It flows with milk and honey. And its fruits too can only be seen as aberrations.

#### § 10.5. THE SPIES SLANDER THE LAND (13:28-33)

כַּח אֶפֶס כִּי־עָזוּ הָעָם הַיֹּשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ וְהַעֲרִים בְּצִרּוֹת גְּדֹלַת מַאֲד וְגַם־  
 יִלְדֵי הָעֵמֶק רָאִינוּ שָׁם: כִּט עַמְלֶק יוֹשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ הַנֶּגֶב וְהַחֲתִי וְהַיְבוּסִי  
 וְהָאֲמֹרִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּהָר וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי יוֹשֵׁב עַל־הַיָּם וְעַל יַד הַיַּרְדֵּן: לֹנִי־הֵם  
 כְּלָב אֶת־הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר עֲלֵה נַעֲלֵה וַיִּרְשְׁנוּ אֹתָהּ כִּי־יָכוֹל  
 נִבְּלָ לָּהּ: לֹא וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־עָלוּ עִמּוֹ אָמְרוּ לֹא נִבְּלָ לַעֲלֹת אֶל־

הָעָם כִּי־חֲזָק הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ: לֹב וַיִּצְיֵאוּ דַבַּת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרוּ אֹתָהּ אֶל־  
 בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֹתָהּ אָרֶץ אִבְלֹת  
 יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הִוא וְכָל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר־רָאִינוּ בְּתוֹכָהּ אַנְשֵׁי מַדּוֹת: לֹג וְשֵׁם  
 רָאִינוּ אֶת־הַנְּפִלִים בְּנֵי עֶגְק מִן־הַנְּפִלִים וַנְּהִי בְעֵינֵינוּ כַּחַגְגָּבִים וְכֹן  
 הָיִינוּ בְעֵינֵיהֶם:

(28) **However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there.**

(29) **Amalekites dwell in the Negeb region; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan.”**

(30) **Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.”**

(31) **But the men who had gone up with him said, “We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we.”**

(32) **Thus they spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, “The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size;**

(33) **we saw the Nephilim there – the Anakites are part of the Nephilim – and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.”**

(28-29) **However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there. Amalekites dwell in the Negeb region; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan:** Although everything in this description is quite accurate, the lie here is that the spies’ opening word is *efes*, “however,” but literally: “zero, nothing.” That is, a nullification of any possible hope: “This will never work.” Yes, the land itself is superlatively outstanding. But the people who live there are likewise unsurpassed in their physical prowess. We will never

overpower them naturally. As the spies are highly respected men, the people find their logic convincing, and resolve to abandon the conquest.

It was at this moment that the spies rejected their assignment and went off in an entirely different direction. They had been charged with investigating the relationship of the land to its inhabitants. No one had asked them to evaluate the feasibility of conquering it.

At a superficial level, one might think that the source of this mistake was simply a “lack of professionalism” on their part. The requirement was to evaluate and report on the socio-economic conditions, which is why a group of economists had been sent (who had no expertise whatsoever in military affairs). But the spies deviated from their true task and took it upon themselves to provide a military assessment. Upon closer analysis, however, we see that it was not actually so. The spies were not “economists”; they were the eyes of the people. Their task was to assess the level of the people’s compatibility, and their own, with the land. And those “eyes” came back and said: “The land is not suitable for us.”

And they were right – with respect to their own generation, at least. After emerging from their Egyptian slavery, the Jews in the wilderness fell into a state of complete submission to God. He provided them with food and shelter, and ordered them what to do and where to move. They had no independence. That transition from one master to another suited them well. But they were not prepared to take the next step: to become a free people in their own land, and take responsibility for their own lives. The tribal leaders also understand that the new living conditions in the land will require a new type of elite, and that they will have to step aside. They therefore strive, albeit unconsciously, to prevent it from happening.

Thus, neither the upper nor the lower echelon wants to proceed with the conquest of the land. Indeed, neither is even capable of doing so.

**(30) Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it”:** Caleb hushed the people “before Moses.” But if Moses himself had anything to say about all this, it is not reported.

Moses is fully present, but he is silent. Seizing the opportunity, Caleb assumes an air of chutzpah and dares to intervene. Apparently, Moses' problem is that he has nothing to say. The spies have fully confirmed his position that the land is a truly wondrous land. But they have also reported that the land cannot be conquered by natural means. Although Moses agrees with them on that point, he had always assumed that the conquest would happen by miraculous means, and that neither the fortified cities nor the giants and children of giants would present any real difficulties.

However, Moses cannot explain any of this to the people, because, by having sent the spies, he has given his own implicit consent to the natural approach to conquering and possessing the land, and now he cannot admit to his mistake. (In the book of Deuteronomy, this detail is presented differently. In that version of the story, Moses himself responds. We will analyze this alternative view of the episode of the spies in our commentary there.)

Thus, in this situation there is a problem in Moses himself. This was not only about the spies' mistake. Neither Moses nor anyone else of that entire generation could enter the land.

Joshua is less active than Caleb in this story. The usual explanation is that Joshua, as the person closest to Moses, thought that the people might suspect him of being less than completely sincere, and he therefore preferred to let Caleb speak. But this cannot explain the comment of the Midrash we have already cited, which states that only Caleb went to Hebron to pray at the gravesite of the Patriarchs, but Joshua did not do so. Thus we see that Joshua's desire to conquer and possess the land was less than that of Caleb. But why?

Moreover, after Moses' death it was Joshua, not Caleb, who succeeded Moses as the leader of the nation. And the reason for this is obvious. Only Joshua, besides having a connection with the land, also had total command of the Torah. Both of those qualities were needed for conquering and possessing the land.

But in a situation of social conflict (such as this one, where someone had to confront the remaining ten spies and the unruly people), a very serious involvement in the Torah actually *reduces* one's ability to deal properly with one's opponents. This is because the Torah teaches that

on every issue there are always various opinions, some of which even contradict one another. This means that one cannot side with any one point of view to the exclusion of all others, since every one of the points of view contains a valid grain of truth.

Thus, a Torah sage (even a Zionist Torah sage like Joshua) has a certain timidity that prevents him from taking an unambiguously harsh position, and this demonstrates the personal quality of *anavah*, “humility.” Therefore, at the onset of the struggle for conquering and possessing the land, it is none other than the “non-religious Zionist” Caleb<sup>51</sup> who comes forward, blazing the trail for others who have the same *chutzpah* to do likewise.

**Caleb ... said, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it”:** Thus, Caleb believed in taking the land entirely through natural means. And since this proved impossible at the given time, Caleb survived the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and went on to conquer the land with the new generation.

But Moses believed that there must be, on the contrary, a miraculous conquest. In principle, this was now not possible, because, having sent the spies, Moses had “flipped the switch,” as it were. The people have now been reprogrammed to expect a completely natural conquest, and there is no turning back. Therefore, Moses cannot participate in the conquest of the land.

Perhaps Moses could still save the day by embracing with Caleb the position of natural conquest. But then he would need to bolster the people’s military spirit by saying to them, “Let us go and take possession of the country, for that is the will of the Almighty.” And for this he would need to master the attribute of *chutzpah*, because a natural conquest is impossible without audacity and daring. But this was already well beyond Moses’ capabilities.

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<sup>51</sup> We are of course not suggesting that Caleb was in any sense “insufficiently religious,” but only wish to note that Joshua and Caleb’s relationship is roughly equivalent to that of the religious and non-religious Zionist trends, respectively, of the past century.

**(31) But the men who had gone up with him said, “We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we”:** And they were right: Their generation did not have the strength to cope with the inhabitants of Canaan in a natural way. However, the reason for this impossibility was not something objectively measurable, that the inhabitants of the land were stronger. Instead, it was subjective – it was in themselves, in their position, and in their lack of self-confidence that they would be victorious.

**We cannot attack that people:** Literally, “We cannot rise up to that people.” The spies are not capable of rising to the level that the Land of Israel requires, such that the entire nation would then follow their example and do likewise. In fact, the military danger was only a pretext.

**For it is stronger than we:** The word *mimennu* can mean either “than we” or “than he.” The simple meaning of this verse is: “The Canaanite people are stronger than we are.” The Midrash, however, offers a different interpretation: “The Canaanite people are stronger than He is.” That is, stronger than God. The spies are essentially saying that the land is stronger than God.<sup>52</sup> Or in other words: “The passions of life in a free country must inevitably draw a person away from religious values. This land presents such a difficult challenge that we cannot possibly cope with it.”

But neither is this position entirely lacking of validity. The spies preferred to leave the people in a “sterile” wilderness, leading an academic life under the supervision of a religious authority, if that was what it would take to avoid the political and moral challenges of freedom in the Land of Israel. They wanted to live within clearly defined boundaries, because they feared a natural and free life.

However, the Divine plan is not merely for the Jews to teach and be taught the Torah in a yeshivah. Rather, they must fulfill their potential by living the fullest possible life, which can happen only in the Land of Israel. Thus, the spies’ arguments were logical, but nonetheless, essentially wrong.

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<sup>52</sup> This was in fact the position of many Jewish religious, anti-Zionist factions throughout the twentieth century.

**(32) Thus they spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted:** The Hebrew *dibbah* can be translated as “lightweight aspersions.” It is not exactly a lie, but it presents the truth in such a manner that it can be easily misunderstood and trigger a negative reaction.

**Saying, “The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers”:** In the words of the Midrash: “Everywhere we went we saw people engaged in burying their dead.” But the reality, says the Midrash, was that the Almighty had arranged all that for the spies’ own benefit. Since the inhabitants of the land were preoccupied with their mourning and grieving, they paid little heed to the spies, who were thus able to slip under the radar, as it were.

With the expression “a country that devours its settlers” the spies are asserting that human power is no match for the power of this land, and anyone who settles on it will be devoured by it.

**All the people that we saw in it are men of great size:** Only giants can live normally in this country; no ordinary person can live there. But not because the conditions there are so bad. On the contrary, everything is quite fine there, but at the same time the conditions are so abnormal that an ordinary person cannot possibly cope with them.

Once again, all this is actually true in some sense. The demands that the Land of Israel places on its inhabitants are indeed unusually steep. But it also has the property of being “a land flowing with milk and honey.” That is, it is a land that corrects and improves the people who settle on it, as we have already explained. This is what makes it possible for the Jewish people to live there in spite of their imperfections.

**(33) We saw the Nephilim there – the Anakites are part of the Nephilim – and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them:** Since the spies could not have known how they looked to the Canaanite inhabitants, their statement that “so we must have looked to them” was obviously just a figment of their own imagination.

In contrast, the two spies whom Joshua sent to Canaan thirty-nine years later heard directly from country’s inhabitants that they were in awe of the Israelites, and in fact, this was the main point of the intelligence that those two spies brought back with them. Thus

everything depends on how you position yourself. If you belittle yourself, claiming that you are unfit to conquer, your poor self-image will inevitably become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In essence, the spies did not lie to the people or deceive them; they only brought to light and into the open the true level of the people. The main result of their scouting was not their report as to whether the land and its fruits were good or bad, but the fact that the inhabitants of the land are enormous, while the Israelites by comparison were nothing more than so many grasshoppers.

To assume such an attitude of total submission was to deny themselves any opportunity or possibility of conquering and possessing the land. Indeed, people who are “small” in their own eyes are no match for the Land of Israel. People who feel small cannot conquer it or survive there.

#### § 10.6. THE PEOPLE WEEP ALL NIGHT (14:1-10)

א וַתִּשָּׂא כָּל־הָעֵדָה וַיִּתְּנוּ אֶת־קוֹלָם וַיִּבְכוּ הָעָם בְּלַיְלָה הַהוּא: ב וַיִּלְנוּ  
עַל־מִשָּׁה וְעַל־אֶהְרֹן כֹּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם כָּל־הָעֵדָה לֹד־  
מִתְּנוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לֹד־מָתָנוּ: ג וְלָמָּה יִי מִבִּיא  
אֲתָנוּ אֶל־הָאֶרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְנַפֵּל בְּחָרֹב נָשִׁינוּ וּטְפָנוּ יְהִיו לְבָז הַלְוֹא  
טוֹב לָנוּ שׁוּב מִצְרַיִמָּה: ד וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אָחִיו נַתְּנָה רֹאשׁ וְנָשׁוּבָה  
מִצְרַיִמָּה: ה וַיַּפֵּל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם לִפְנֵי כָּל־קְהֵל עֵדַת בְּנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל: ו וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נוּן וְכָלֵב בֶּן־יִפְתָּה מִן־הַתְּרִים אֶת־הָאֶרֶץ קִרְעוּ  
בְּגָדֵיהֶם: ז וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־כָּל־עֵדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ  
בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֲתָה טוֹבָה הָאֶרֶץ מְאֹד מְאֹד: ח אִם־חִפְצְךָ בָּנוּ יִי וְהִבִּיא אֲתָנוּ  
אֶל־הָאֶרֶץ הַזֹּאת וּנְתַנָּה לָנוּ אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־הוּא זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבָשׁ: ט אַךְ  
בִּי אֲלִתְמַרְדּוּ וְאַתֶּם אֲלִתִּירָאוּ אֶת־עַם הָאֶרֶץ כִּי לַחֲמֵנוּ הֵם סָר  
צֵלָם מֵעֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּי אֲתָנוּ אֲלִתִּירָאִים: י וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל־הָעֵדָה לְרָגוּם אֲתָם  
בְּאֲבָנִים וַכְּבוֹד יִי נִרְאָה בְּאַהֲל מוֹעֵד אֶל־כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

(1) The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night.

(2) All the Israelites railed against Moses and Aaron. “If only we had died in the land of Egypt,” the whole community shouted at them, “or if only we might die in this wilderness!

(3) Why is the Lord taking us to that land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be carried off! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!”

(4) And they said to one another, “Let us head back for Egypt.”

(5) Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembled congregation of the Israelites.

(6) And Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, of those who had scouted the land, rent their clothes

(7) and exhorted the whole Israelite community: “The land that we traversed and scouted is an exceedingly good land.

(8) If the Lord is pleased with us, He will bring us into that land, a land that flows with milk and honey, and give it to us;

(9) only you must not rebel against the Lord. Have no fear then of the people of the country, for they are our prey: their protection has departed from them, but the Lord is with us. Have no fear of them!”

(10) As the whole community threatened to pelt them with stones, the Presence of the Lord appeared in the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites.

(1) **The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night:** Although the spies fed the people disinformation, the people are held responsible for their own decisions. They cannot blame the spies for having “deceived” them.

**That night:** “That night” indicates a particular night. Although the text does not specify which night it was, Tradition holds that this was the Ninth of the month of Ab, the date of several major future calamities and catastrophes that would befall the Jewish people, most notably the destruction of both the first and second Temples in Jerusalem (586 BCE and 70 CE). Thus, the foundation of expulsions from the Land of Israel, which occurred only many centuries later, was in fact laid in the mourning of the people that day in the wilderness in the incident of the spies.

(2) **“If only we had died in the land of Egypt,” the whole community shouted at them, “or if only we might die in this wilderness!”**: And ultimately, as they have here expressed their wish, so will it be fulfilled.

(4) **And they said to one another, “Let us head back for Egypt”**: The generation of the Exodus was fundamentally incapable of conquering the land. The report of the spies only brought this reality to the fore and made it manifest.

(5) **Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembled congregation of the Israelites**: Moses and Aaron have already lost whatever opportunity they had to act. Because the fact is, once the people are incapacitated, their leaders are unable to function.

(6) **And Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, of those who had scouted the land, rent their clothes**: This was their reaction to hearing the wretched news.

(7) **And exhorted the whole Israelite community**: Joshua, who had been silent at first, now joined forces with Caleb. Although Moses was no longer trying to persuade the people, Joshua would not yield to despair, thus demonstrating his potential to become an independent leader.

In a situation where the senior leaders, Moses and Aaron, feel themselves powerless, Joshua and Caleb, younger men of the up-and-coming generation, persist in the seemingly hopeless struggle. In the end, and because of this, Moses and Aaron will not merit to enter the Land of Israel, but Joshua and Caleb will.

(7-8) **The land that we traversed and scouted is an exceedingly good land ... a land that flows with milk and honey**: “Exceedingly good” in the Hebrew is *me’, me’*. The Midrash understands this reduplication as meaning: “The very properties that you see as the land’s shortcomings are in fact its virtues.”

It is genuinely difficult to live in the Land of Israel, owing to the strict demands it places on every inhabitant. But that said, the land also affords those who choose to live in it an opportunity for a high level of self-actualization. It is a land flowing with milk and honey – even if one falls short of its expectations today, the land itself will help him improve, simply by virtue of his living there.

**(9) Have no fear then of the people of the country, for they are our prey: their protection has departed from them:** Literally, “their shadow has departed from them.” God’s shadow is symbolic of Divine protection and patronage. Ultimately, it is not brute strength that decides our proper course of action, but compliance with the plans of the Almighty. And He has commanded us to conquer and possess the land.

**(9-10) But the Lord is with us. Have no fear of them! ... The whole community threatened to pelt them with stones:** The people are afraid, primarily, not of the inhabitants of Canaan, but of themselves – of their own transformation in the process of conquering the land. Therefore, in response to Joshua and Caleb’s arguments, the people want to kill them.

**The Presence of the Lord appeared in the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites:** To save Joshua and Caleb the Almighty is forced to intervene. This is a reliable indicator that no healthy impulses remain among the people.

#### § 10.7. THE ALMIGHTY’S WRATH (14:11-38)

יא וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה עַד־אָנֹכָהּ יִנְאַצְנִי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְעַד־אָנֹכָהּ לֹא־יֵאֱמָנוּ  
 בִּי בְכָל־הָאֲתוֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ: יב אֲכַנּוּ בַדְבָר וְאוֹרְשָׁנוּ וְאֶעֱשֶׂה  
 אֶתְךָ לְגוֹי־גְדוֹל וְעָצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ: יג וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְיָ וְשָׁמְעוּ מִצְרַיִם  
 כִּי־הִעֲלִיתָ בְּכַחַךְ אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה מִקִּרְבּוֹ: יד וְאָמְרוּ אֶל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ  
 הַזֹּאת שָׁמְעוּ כִּי־אַתָּה יְיָ בְּקִרְבְּ הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר־עָלִינוּ בְּעֵין נְרָאָה | אַתָּה  
 יי וְעַנְנְךָ עִמָּד עֲלֵהֶם וּבַעֲמֹד עִן אַתָּה הַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם וּבַעֲמֹד אֵשׁ  
 לַיְלָה: טו וְהִמַּתָּה אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד וְאָמְרוּ הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמְעוּ  
 אֶת־שִׁמְעוֹךָ לֵאמֹר: טז מִבְּלִתִּי יְכַלֵּת יְיָ לְהַבִּיא אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל־  
 הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּע לָהֶם וַיִּשְׁחָטֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר: יז וְעַתָּה יִגְדַל־נָא פֶּחַ אַדְנִי  
 כְּאִשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ לֵאמֹר: יח יְיָ אֶרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד נִשְׂא עֵן וְפָשַׁע וְנִקְחָה  
 לֹא יִנְקָה פְלֹד עֵן אָבוֹת עַל־בְּנֵי עַל־שְׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל־רַבְעִים: טט סְלַח־  
 נָא לְעַוְנוֹת הָעָם הַזֶּה כַּגְּדֹל חֶסֶדְךָ וּכְאִשֶׁר נִשְׂאָתָה לְעָם הַזֶּה מִמִּצְרַיִם  
 וְעַד־הַנְּהָה: כ וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ סְלַחְתִּי כַּדְבָרְךָ: כא וְאוֹלָם חִי־אָנֹכִי וַיִּמְלֵא כְבוֹד־

יִי אֶת־כָּל־הָאָרֶץ: כִּי כָל־הָאֲנָשִׁים הָרְאִים אֶת־כַּבְּדִי וְאֶת־אֲתֹנִי  
 אֲשֶׁר־עָשִׂיתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וּבַמִּדְבָּר וַיִּנְסוּ אֹתִי זֶה עָשׂוּ פְעָמַיִם וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ  
 בְּקוֹלִי: כִּי אִם־יִרְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְתָּם וְכָל־מִנְאֲצֵי  
 לֹא יִרְאוּהָ: כִּד וְעַבְדִּי כָלֵב עָקַב הִיָּתְהָ רֹחַ אַחֲרֵת עִמּוֹ וַיִּמְלֵא אַחֲרָי  
 וְהִבִּיאֲתִיו אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־בָּא שָׁמָּה וְזָרְעוּ יוֹרְשָׁנָה: כִּי וְהִעֲמַלְקִי  
 וְהִכְנַעְנִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּעֵמֶק מִחֹר פָּנָיו וְסָעוּ לַכֶּסֶם הַמִּדְבָּר דֶּרֶךְ יַם־סוּף:

כֹּו וַיִּדְבֹר יִי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: כֹּו עַד־מַתִּי לְעֵדָה הָרַעָה  
 הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר הִמָּה מְלִינִים עָלַי אֶת־תְּלִזּוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הִמָּה  
 מְלִינִים עָלַי שָׁמַעְתִּי: כִּי אֵמַר אֱלֹהִים חִי־אֲנִי נָא־יִי אִם־לֹא כֹאֲשֶׁר  
 דִּבַּרְתֶּם בְּאָזְנִי כֹן אֲעִשֶׂה לַכֶּסֶם: כִּי בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה יִפְלוּ פְגַרְיֶכֶם וְכָל־  
 פְּקֻדֵיכֶם לְכָל־מִסְפָּרְכֶם מִבְּנֵי עֹשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמִמֵּלֶה אֲשֶׁר הִלִּינְתֶם  
 עָלַי: לֹא־אִסַּתֶּם תִּבְאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת־יָדַי לְשַׁכֵּן אֶתְכֶם  
 בָּהּ כִּי אִם־כָּלֵב בֶּן־יִפְנֶה וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נּוּן: לֹא וְטַפְּכֶם אֲשֶׁר אִמַּרְתֶּם לְבָז  
 יְהִיָּה וְהִבִּיאֲתִי אֲתֶם וַיִּדְעוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר מֵאִסְתֶּם בָּהּ: לֹב וּפְגַרְיֶכֶם  
 אֲתֶם יִפְלוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה: לֹב וּבְנֵיכֶם יְהִיוּ רַעִים בַּמִּדְבָּר אַרְבָּעִים  
 שָׁנָה וְנִשְׂאוּ אֶת־זְנוּתֵיכֶם עַד־תֶּם פְּגַרְיֶכֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר: לֹב בַּמִּסְפָּר  
 הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר־תִּרְתֶּם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם לְשָׁנָה יוֹם לְשָׁנָה  
 תִּשְׂאוּ אֶת־עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה וַיִּדְעֶתֶם אֶת־תְּנוּאָתִי: לֹב אֲנִי יִי  
 דִּבַּרְתִּי אִם־לֹא | זֹאת אֲעִשֶׂה לְכָל־הָעֵדָה הָרַעָה הַזֹּאת הַנּוֹעֲדִים עָלַי  
 בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה יִתְמוּ וְשָׁם יָמָתוּ: לֹב וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־שָׁלַח מֹשֶׁה לְתוֹר  
 אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וַיָּשָׁבוּ וַיִּלּוּנוּ (וַיִּלְיִנוּ) עָלָיו אֶת־כָּל־הָעֵדָה לְהוֹצִיא דָבָה  
 עַל־הָאָרֶץ: לֹב וַיָּמָתוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים מוֹצְאֵי דַבַּת־הָאָרֶץ רַעָה בַּמִּגְפָּה לִפְנֵי  
 יִי: לֹב וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נּוּן וְכָלֵב בֶּן־יִפְנֶה חִיו מִן־הָאֲנָשִׁים הָהֵם הַהֹלְכִים  
 לְתוֹר אֶת־הָאָרֶץ:

(11) And the Lord said to Moses, “How long will this people spurn Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me despite all the signs that I have performed in their midst?”

(12) I will strike them with pestilence and disown them, and I will make of you a nation far more numerous than they!”

(13) And Moses said unto the Lord, “When the Egyptians shall hear – for Thou broughtest up this people in Thy might from among them,

(14) they will say to the inhabitants of this land who have heard that You, O Lord, are in the midst of this people; that You, O Lord, appear in plain sight when Your cloud rests over them and when You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.

(15) If then You slay this people to a man, the nations who have heard Your fame will say,

(16) ‘It must be because the Lord was powerless to bring that people into the land He had promised them on oath that He slaughtered them in the wilderness.’

(17) Therefore, I pray, let my Lord’s forbearance be great, as You have declared, saying,

(18) ‘The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in kindness; forgiving iniquity and transgression; yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of fathers upon children, upon the third and fourth generations.’

(19) Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt.”

(20) And the Lord said, “I pardon, as you have asked.

(21) Nevertheless, as I live and as the Lord’s Presence fills the whole world,

(22) none of the men who have seen My Presence and the signs that I have performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, and who have tried Me these many times and have disobeyed Me,

(23) shall see the land that I promised on oath to their fathers; none of those who spurn Me shall see it.

(24) But My servant Caleb, because he was imbued with a different spirit and remained loyal to Me – him will I bring into the land that he entered, and his offspring shall hold it as a possession.

(25) Now the Amalekites and the Canaanites occupy the valleys. Start out, then, tomorrow and march into the wilderness by way of the Sea of Reeds.”

(26) The Lord spoke further to Moses and Aaron,

(27) **“How much longer shall that wicked community keep muttering against Me? Very well, I have heeded the incessant muttering of the Israelites against Me.**

(28) **Say to them: ‘As I live,’ says the Lord, ‘I will do to you just as you have urged Me.**

(29) **In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop. Of all of you who were recorded in your various lists from the age of twenty years up, you who have muttered against Me,**

(30) **not one shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you – save Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.**

(31) **Your children who, you said, would be carried off – these will I allow to enter; they shall know the land that you have rejected.**

(32) **But your carcasses shall drop in this wilderness,**

(33) **while your children roam the wilderness for forty years, suffering for your faithlessness, until the last of your carcasses is down in the wilderness.**

(34) **You shall bear your punishment for forty years, corresponding to the number of days – forty days – that you scouted the land: a year for each day. Thus you shall know what it means to thwart Me.**

(35) **I the Lord have spoken: Thus will I do to all that wicked band that has banded together against Me: in this very wilderness they shall die to the last man.”**

(36) **As for the men whom Moses sent to scout the land, those who came back and caused the whole community to mutter against him by spreading calumnies about the land –**

(37) **those who spread such calumnies about the land died of plague, by the will of the Lord.**

(38) **Of those men who had gone to scout the land, only Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh survived.**

**(11-12) And the Lord said to Moses, “How long will this people spurn Me ... ? I will strike them with pestilence and disown them, and I will make of you a nation far more numerous than they!”:**

This is a challenge to Moses, closely paralleling the same challenge in the incident of the golden calf (Exod. 32:10).<sup>55</sup> However, there are two important differences between the two.

First, in the case of the golden calf the people had simply erred, as they had become disoriented by what they thought was Moses' failure to return at the expected time after his forty-day absence. Therefore, upon his return Moses was able to take control of the situation. But here, the problem was not the disinformation the people had received but their abandonment of their mission.

Secondly, whereas in the case of the golden calf Moses could rely on the support of the Levites, here no one was willing to defend Joshua and Caleb, i.e., there was no one to rely on. Therefore, to advocate for the preservation of the existing people and reject the idea of creating a new people from their descendants – to continue working with a nation that had shown itself unwilling to promote the fulfillment of the Divine plan – Moses needed to demonstrate true spiritual heroism.

**(13-16) And Moses said unto the Lord, “When the Egyptians shall hear – for Thou broughtest up this people in Thy might from among them, they ... will say, ‘It must be because the Lord was powerless to bring that people into the land He had promised them on oath that He slaughtered them in the wilderness.’: Moses' arguments here seem quite similar to the arguments he had made in the story of the golden calf (Exod. 32:12), but there is an important difference. Moses there says: “Let not the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.’ Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people.” That is, the perception will be that the Jewish nation perished because of God's inexorable wrath.**

Here, however, the cause of the annihilation would be understood as the Almighty's powerlessness against the brute strength of the peoples of Canaan. The nations of the world will draw yet more erroneous conclusions about how the Almighty governs the world. And if this is allowed, the entire meaning of the Exodus, which consists in

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<sup>55</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 27.3.

revealing the Almighty's presence and actions to all of mankind, will be lost. Therefore, Moses argues, God must forgive the Jewish people and preserve them in spite of their trespasses.

**(17) Therefore, I pray, let my Lord's forbearance be great:** The Almighty's strength is magnified in the eyes of mankind only through the manifestation of His mercy, not through punishment.

**(17-18) As You have declared, saying: 'The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in kindness':** By referring to the Almighty's same qualities that God taught him the last time in the almost identical context (Exod. 34:5-9), Moses shows his mastery of the previous lesson and his ability to apply it to the new, current situation.<sup>54</sup>

**(20) And the Lord said, "I pardon, as you have asked":** Because Moses has stood the test and advanced, the lesson has been learned, and the Almighty is prepared to allow Moses to continue the mission entrusted to him.

**(21, 23) Nevertheless, as I live and as the Lord's Presence fills the whole world, none of the men ... shall see the land that I promised on oath to their fathers:** In order for mankind to have a more correct understanding of the Divine, mercy and punishment must be integrated.

**(24) But My servant Caleb, because he was imbued with a different spirit and remained loyal to Me – him will I bring into the land that he entered, and his offspring shall hold it as a possession:** Only Caleb is mentioned here, because he opposed the spies more actively and decisively.

**(25) Now the Amalekites and the Canaanites occupy the valleys:** This is not meant merely as a confirmation that those nations live there, but as a warning: if you go, they will kill you, because I will not be with you.

**By way of the Sea of Reeds:** Toward Egypt, as you wished. But know that you cannot return to Egypt, nor, for that matter, will you enter Canaan.

**(29) In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop. Of all of you who were recorded in your various lists from the age of**

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<sup>54</sup> For commentary on these attributes of the Almighty see *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 28.5.

**twenty years up:** The punishment was prolonged for a period of forty years, in order that those who left Egypt in their youth would not die young. The Midrash adds that none of them died younger than sixty years old. Thus, they were condemned to live and die in the wilderness, but by no means to die a naturally or unnaturally early death. Each individual lived out his full life span. Had the people suddenly died en masse, it would have been perceived as the Almighty committing an atrocity. But this way, the view from the sidelines was that everything was occurring naturally – just a normal transition from one generation to the next.

**(30) Not one shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you – save Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun:** Here Caleb and Joshua are mentioned together, but Caleb first, because in matters pertaining to the Land of Israel he remains the leader.

**(31) Your children who, you said, would be carried off – these will I allow to enter; they shall know the land that you have rejected:** Their children will know God through the conquest of the land. In matters of the geulah, “the Messianic redemption,” the children often understand better than the older generation.

#### § 10.8. A FAILED ATTEMPT TO CONQUER THE LAND (14:39-45)

לט וידבר משה את־הדברים האלה אל־כל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ויתאבלו הָעָם  
מֵאֵד: מ וישׁכמו בבקר ויעלו אל־ראש־ההר לאמר הננו ועלינו אל־  
המקום אשר־אמר יי כי חטאנו: מא ויאמר משה למה זה אתם עברים  
את־פי יי והוא לא תצלח: מב אל־תעלו כי אין יי בקרבכם ולא תנגפו  
לפני איביכם: מג כי העמלקי והכנעני שם לפניכם ונפלתם בחרב כי־  
על־כן שבתם מאחרי יי ולא־יהיה יי עמכם: מד ויעפלו לעלות אל־  
ראש ההר וארון ברית־ייל ומשה לא־משו מקרב המחנה: מה וירד  
העמלקי והכנעני הישב בהר ההוא ויכום ויכתום עד־החרמה:

**(39) When Moses repeated these words to all the Israelites, the people were overcome by grief.**

(40) **Early next morning they set out toward the crest of the hill country, saying, “We are prepared to go up to the place that the Lord has spoken of, for we were wrong.”**

(41) **But Moses said, “Why do you transgress the Lord’s command? This will not succeed.**

(42) **Do not go up, lest you be routed by your enemies, for the Lord is not in your midst.**

(43) **For the Amalekites and the Canaanites will be there to face you, and you will fall by the sword, inasmuch as you have turned from following the Lord and the Lord will not be with you.”**

(44) **Yet defiantly they marched toward the crest of the hill country, though neither the Lord’s Ark of the Covenant nor Moses stirred from the camp.**

(45) **And the Amalekites and the Canaanites who dwelt in that hill country came down and dealt them a shattering blow at Hormah.**

(39-40) **When Moses repeated these words to all the Israelites, the people were overcome by grief. Early next morning they set out toward the crest of the hill country, saying, “We are prepared to go up to the place that the Lord has spoken of, for we were wrong”:** Unlike the incident of the golden calf, here there is no repentance. Instead of asking God to tell them the proper course of action under the circumstances, the people act impulsively. “Since I have been punished, I will go to the other extreme.” This is the thinking and behavior of a hypersensitive, self-absorbed child, not an adult taking responsibility for his future.

(41) **But Moses said, “Why do you transgress the Lord’s command? This will not succeed”:** At first glance, everything here seems clear. The Israelites must not take it upon themselves to go off in a direction where God does not lead them. But in fact, Moses’ words are rather strange. We would have expected him simply to say, “You must not do that, for it is forbidden.” But he adds, “This will not succeed.”

Rabbi Zadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin therefore explains this passage as follows: “You want to do this precisely *because* you know it will not be successful. Why do you transgress the Lord’s command this way?”

Moses is telling the people: in doing an about-face and saying that you are now prepared to go up, it is obvious that you are not genuine, that you are motivated not by a real love of the land, but only by your contrarian impulses, to do precisely what you know cannot possibly succeed. If, however, at some time in the future your wish to enter and conquer the land will be true and pure, you can then go without waiting for permission, and you will be successful.

In this connection we can relate the following vignette, an incident that occurred in our own times.

In 1973, in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, the disciples of the Merkaz HaRav yeshiva approached Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, saying: “Rabbi, we have decided to build a settlement.” He replied: “This is not the right time for that. The people are not ready for it, and the government will not support you.”

Some time later they came to him again: “Rabbi, we have nonetheless assembled a group that plans to build a settlement.” He answered them again: “You must not do that. Neither the people nor the government will support you. They will oppose you.”

A little later they approached him yet again: “Rabbi, we have decided to build the settlement. The work is beginning right now as we speak, and we are asking for your blessing.” Rabbi Zvi Yehuda then replied: “If so, then of course I give you my blessing.”

In other words, so long as the participants are not yet ready to “charge the barricades” and let the undertaking actively begin, it cannot possibly succeed. But once they have come to that point and are prepared to proceed, the enterprise will be successful.

Such readiness cannot be rushed; it must properly develop over time. And from a tactical point of view, on the contrary – it is better to refrain. If the activists rush in prematurely, and then, when faced with unforeseen difficulties, they retreat, it becomes obvious that they were never really ready in the first place.

**(45) And the Amalekites and the Canaanites who dwelt in that hill country came down and dealt them a shattering blow**

**at Hormah:** This translation understands *Hormah* as a proper noun, the name of a place. But a different translation is also possible: “And dealt them a shattering blow unto the point of utter destruction.” This defeat was so overwhelming that even thirty-nine years later the Almighty could not allow the people to tread the same path again, lest they lose their motivation to conquer and possess the land. Thus they had to avoid the Dead Sea region (Edom, Ammon, and Moab) on the southeast, approaching the Land of Israel still from the east, but from a point much further north, crossing the Jordan River opposite Jericho.

## § 10.9. CONCLUSION: PROVIDENCE, HUMILITY, AND THE CORRECTION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ENSLAVEMENT

### (a) Two levels of Providence

The book of Numbers gives the impression that the reason for the Israelites’ forty years of wanderings through the wilderness was the sin of the spies and the people’s mistake in following their lead. Had they done the right thing, those arduous wilderness wanderings would have been unnecessary, and the death of an entire generation of Israelites in the wilderness would have been prevented. The generation that left Egypt would have entered the Land of Israel, conquered it, and possessed it.

This impression became entrenched in the Jewish national consciousness. That is, the story begat a national narrative and worldview in which the misfortunes that befall us are seen as the result of our own sins and mistakes, and in which there is not only individual responsibility for the future, but national responsibility as well. This is a decidedly positive view of the world, as it directs the people to actively correct their own shortcomings, gives a sense that the course of history is fair and just overall, and gives the people strength to cope with difficulties. These have been essential components of Jewish survival throughout the most difficult and trying conditions of the nation’s history.

However, if we delve deeper into our analysis of the Torah’s account of the sin of the spies, we see that the situation was actually much

more complicated. The real reason for the forty years of wanderings in the wilderness was that the generation of the Exodus – not only the people, but even Moses himself! – was unprepared psychologically to conquer and possess the land. This had to wait for the next generation to accomplish it.

But as in other similar situations, this decision had to manifest itself not merely as an “arbitrary” decision from Above, but in the form of human justice. The Almighty has arranged His Providence such that the global, teleological “Providence of unity” – Providence oriented in the direction that God wants humankind to go – is clothed in the form of a local “Providence of good and evil” (that is, the Providence of reward and punishment that focuses on mercy and justice as they relate to human action).

We can compare this to our role as parents raising children (since God’s relationship to man is, first and foremost, the relationship of a parent to a child). When as parents we want to teach a child something we deem essential for them to know or practice, we encourage or punish the child for proper or improper behavior, respectively. But we do all that not because it is fair *per se*. Our objective is not to act “justly” with respect to the child; rather, we reward or punish only because we want to educate the child properly, moving him or her toward the intended goal.

At the same time, there is no real value in treating the child justly as seen from our position; instead, yes, there is great value in treating the child fairly from his point of view – how he perceives it. After all, the fairness of our actions in the eyes of the child (his understanding that he should expect to be rewarded for good deeds and punished for behaving badly) is quite necessary as an educational measure, because without it the child will not assimilate our message and will not advance.

If we base our decisions for raising the child on our own understanding of the goals of child rearing, but in a manner that is incomprehensible and illogical to him, such that he cannot understand why we are encouraging or punishing him, he will not get a sense of the correctness of the world around him, and he will fail to learn proper behavior.

We must make every situation sufficiently clear to the child such that he will see justice in the world according to his own understanding of the concept. We, the parents, must adjust these “fair” rewards and punishments in a manner that they move the child along in the proper direction.

And that precisely describes the Almighty’s relationship to the Jewish people (and to humanity in general). Although He of course knew *ab initio* that the generation of the Exodus would not be able to enter the Land of Israel, the people received this decision in response to their own actions, when their own inability to conquer the Land became clear to them. Now, after realizing their mistake and understanding why they are being punished, they feel that it is all fair – and thus they can continue to live and survive. And through their children and grandchildren, at least, eventually conquer and possess the Land of Israel.

In other words, the child’s upbringing is necessarily clothed in the guise of justice – reward and punishment – even if its actual essence, and its visible cause and effect, are not about those at all, but about advancing the child toward a predetermined goal. When we deny a child something that is inappropriate for his age, we do so not in order to punish him, but only because he is not mature enough to cope with it. However, it would be wrong to simply deprive him of what he wants. We must show him the validity of the prohibition, so that in his eyes it will be fair. Only then his education will be successful.

### **(b) Moses and the people – A comparison of character traits**

We have seen that the sin of the spies was not the real reason for the forty years of wanderings in the wilderness. That sin only brought to light the slave mentality of the “Exodus generation,” the character trait that ultimately prevented them from reaching the Land of Israel.

In the previous weekly portion, *Behaalotecha*, we saw that the reason Moses could not enter the Land of Israel was his inordinate humility.

We might think that these two qualities – Moses’ *anavah*, “humility,” and the people’s slave mentality – are completely unrelated. We see

humility as a positive trait, and a slave mentality as a purely negative one. But in fact, these two character traits are directly connected.

As already discussed, the quality of *anavah* is essential for the success of the learning process. In order to accept the teacher's words as authoritative and fully obey them, the student must have the attribute of *anavah*. That is why Moses, the humblest man on earth, was able to become the greatest of all the prophets, and it is also the reason that the Torah was given through him. Moses does not have his own mindset; he is completely "transparent," and can therefore comprehend God's words distinctly, and then convey them precisely to others.

But this total submission to God's authority has also a downside. Moses expects his disciples – the entire Jewish nation – to be equally submissive. If the people, however close they are to him, are too independently minded, too impudent to be able to submit, Moses cannot advance them along their spiritual path.

The people's life in the wilderness was based entirely on humility. The people could not decide anything on their own – they were shown where to march and when to stop; thus, their order of movement was entirely predetermined and prescribed. Their food too was given to them from Above.

This total lack of independence in the wilderness, a life thoroughly imbued with the attribute of humility, fully correlated to their slave mentality. And Moses manages the people in the very same style. He "hits the rock," that is, he controls them legislatively. Moses just gives orders, never asking the people what they really want or what they think. In all this we see the close connection between slavery and humility.

Although Moses himself was brought up in Pharaoh's palace and was never a slave, his view of the world is nonetheless the paradigm of slavery. In Egypt, we should note, both the lower and upper classes of society shared that worldview. When people are slaves, their leadership too must acquire a slave mentality, or they cannot control their slaves. In light of all this we understand that at the beginning of the Exodus journey, Moses' administrative paradigm based on *anavah* was entirely proper and adequate: without complete submission he could not have

led the Jews out of Egypt and received the Torah. At the elementary level, a school needs its students to be humble if they are to learn and understand. There is no other way.

Moses is a servant of God, not a slave of men. A servant of God listens to what he is told from Above, and completely obeys. In this sense, everyone to a man in that generation of the Exodus had a slave mentality.

The Torah calls Egypt “the house of bondage” (Exod. 20:2). Slave conditions dominated there – everyone was a slave. When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and they became slaves to God, they were no longer slaves to Pharaoh. But neither did they become a free people.

Needless to say, becoming slaves to God was enormous progress as compared with their previous status. But from an authentically Jewish perspective, this was still a far cry from the ideal! The ideal is to be God’s partners, not His slaves. But such a huge transition could not be accomplished in just one step. It required two stages. First to become slaves to God, not to Pharaoh. And only then to advance to becoming a free people and true partners with God.

It should be noted that understanding this point is quite difficult. We very often hear that the religious ideal is to be the slaves to God – to do whatever God has commanded. However, this kind of attitude, which is positive only at the initial stage of development, is never the ideal for human development, nor is it enough for proper religiosity or correct spiritual leadership.

And yet, the opposite attitude of non-submission, a perverse desire to do exactly the opposite of what has been ordered, constitutes a rebellion, and is also wrong.

As a general rule, a worldview that sees everything as a choice between submission and non-submission is the view of a slave or a child. The worldview of a properly developed adult is based on thinking for oneself; understanding every situation on its unique merits; integrating perceptions received from Above with perceptions derived through one’s own powers of reasoning; and always carefully considering how the Divine instruction received from Above should best be implemented in any given situation.

In certain situations, we are even expected to take exception to God's positions. And even to argue with Him, just as the Patriarchs did. In fact, the right – indeed the obligation – to do exactly that is an essential feature of the Jewish religion. Many disputes with the Almighty as described in the Torah end with the Almighty changing his position in deference to an argument advanced by a human being.

Therefore, whenever you find yourself at odds with something the Almighty has said, you must assume that the Almighty is testing you, to see how well you are able to argue with Him. Not to defy him, of course, but to find a synthesis and a reconciliation of what He has told you from above and your own inner convictions.

At the same time, we inevitably extend our model of relating to God to our relationships with people as well. Those who see servitude to God as man's religious ideal soon come to expect that other people will become "spiritual slaves" to their leader by following him unquestioningly. But this is a gross misrepresentation of the ideal.

Conversely, one who sees himself as a free agent and at the same time also as God's partner will treat people the same way.

Free and daring – this is exactly how Jews must be in their state and in their land during this era of the *geulah*, "the Messianic redemption," everyone living by his own thinking and values, his own vision of how life is meant to be, at both the individual and national levels. No one may dictate to others or impose his views on others.

Only when that vision becomes the accepted standard and is put into practice, can man's dialogue with God – individual, national, and universal – be fully realized.

But as already noted, Moses, who sees himself and the world around him through the lens of *anavah*, "humility," is unable to lead such a people.

Moses' extreme humility was critical to the success of the Exodus mission. However, that which is conducive, indeed even essential, to the initial success of an undertaking will often become only a problem and a hindrance in the course of its further development. Moses as a personality is quite adequate for the generation of the Exodus. But the other side of that adequacy is that Moses must die with them in the wilderness. Only the new generation, who by virtue of a long series of

crises experienced during their wilderness journey learns to acquire at

least some independence, can then proceed to begin conquering and

**§ 11. COMMANDMENTS PERTAINING**  
possessing the land **TO THE WANDERINGS**  
**IN THE WILDERNESS**

**§ 11.1. RESTORING LIFE AFTER THE VERDICT**

Now that the account of the incident of the spies is complete, the Torah moves on to cover a number of special commandments, and to clarify the manner of their performance here in the wilderness, and later in the Land of Israel. God gives these commandments at this time in order to bolster the spirit of the Israelites. After receiving the sentence that they would have to wander in the wilderness for forty years, and as the severity of that decree weighs heavily on their consciousness, the people need to feel that their life still has a purpose, that they have a reason to go on living.

The first commandments given here pertain to the details of sacrifices that apply to the Land of Israel. This emphasizes that the nation *will* eventually reach the land, where their spiritual level in life will be much higher than it had been in the wilderness. (This point is expressed symbolically in the libations of wine upon the altar.)

The next commandments relate to atonement for particular offenses. For sins committed unwittingly and without malice, atonement is possible, and the Almighty will forgive. Thus, the people are encouraged to view the world optimistically with the hope of receiving the Almighty's mercy, and not to succumb to despair. And all the more, to refrain from fixating on a malicious interpretation of everything that has happened recently.

As this weekly portion *Sh'lach* nears its conclusion, we read about the man who was found to be gathering firewood on the Sabbath and the severe punishment he incurred for that offense. The Torah is stressing that although there is now an irreversible decree that this generation will die in the wilderness, none of the commandments have been cancelled or revoked. On the contrary, the commandments and prohibitions remain in full force, and anyone who violates them should expect to be punished commensurately.

The very last paragraph of weekly portion *Sh'lach* deals with the commandment to make *tzitzit*, “fringes,” on the corners of all four-cornered garments, and to “look at it” (Num. 15:39), emphasizing that all of God’s commandments must be viewed as a single complex aimed at human advancement toward holiness. Also emphasized in connection with the *tzitzit* is the requirement to remember the Exodus from Egypt – that it was the Almighty who brought the Jewish people out of Egypt, and that He is their God. The essential point is that one must never assume that God’s intentions are anything but positive and good. Even when He punishes, His objective is only to improve and correct.

Taken together, these are the fundamental principles that the people need to understand if they are to overcome the challenges of their wanderings through the wilderness – long, arduous, and for all intents and purposes endless wanderings, psychologically speaking. Because it is now their fate to die there and proceed no further.

### § 11.2. WINE AND MEAL OFFERINGS AS ADJUNCTS TO THE SACRIFICES (15: 1-12)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי  
 תְּבֹאוּ אֶל־אֶרֶץ מוֹשְׁבֵי־תֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אָנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם: ג וְעַשִׂיתֶם אִשָּׁה לִּי  
 עֲלֵה אוֹזֵבַח לְפִלֵא־נֹדֵד אוֹ בְּנֹדֶה אוֹ בְּמַעַדֵיכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת רֵיחַ נִיחֹחַ  
 לִּי מִזֶּה־בְּקָר אוֹ מִזֶּה־הָעֶזְאֵן: ד וְהִקְרִיב הַמִּקְרִיב קֶרֶבֶן לִּי מִנְחָה סֶלֶת  
 עֲשׂוּן בָּלוּל בְּרֶבְעֵית הַהֵיזֶן שֶׁמֶן: ה וַיִּזֶן לְנֶסֶךְ רְבִיעִית הַהֵיזֶן תַּעֲשֶׂה  
 עַל־הָעֵלָה אוֹ לִזְבַּח לִפְבֶּשׂ הָאֶחָד: ו אוֹ לֵאמֹל תַּעֲשֶׂה מִנְחָה סֶלֶת  
 שְׁנֵי עֲשָׂרִים בָּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן שְׁלֵשִׁית הַהֵיזֶן: ז וַיִּזֶן לְנֶסֶךְ שְׁלֵשִׁית הַהֵיזֶן  
 תִּקְרִיב רֵיח־נִיחֹחַ לִּי: ח וְכִי־תַעֲשֶׂה בֶזֶבֶק עֲלֵה אוֹזֵבַח לְפִלֵא־נֹדֵד

אֹזְשֵׁלְמָיִם לַיְי: ט וְהִקְרִיב עַל־בֶּן־הַבָּקָר מִנְחָה סֶלֶת שְׁלֵשָׁה עֶשְׂרִינָיִם  
 בָּלוּל בְּשֶׁמֶן חֲצִי הַהֵיזֶן: י וַיִּזֶן תְּקָרִיב לְנֶסֶד חֲצִי הַהֵיזֶן אִשָּׁה רִיח־נִיחֹחַ  
 לַיְי: יא כָּכָה יַעֲשֶׂה לְשׁוֹר הָאֶחָד אֹז לְאֵיל הָאֶחָד אֹז־לִשָּׁה בְּכַבָּשִׁים אֹז  
 בְּעִזִּים: יב כַּמִּסְפָּר אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּ כָכָה תַעֲשׂוּ לְאֶחָד כַּמִּסְפָּרָם:

(1) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**

(2) **Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you to settle in,**

(3) **and would present an offering by fire to the Lord from the herd or from the flock, be it burnt offering or sacrifice, in fulfillment of a vow explicitly uttered, or as a freewill offering, or at your fixed occasions, producing an odor pleasing to the Lord:**

(4) **The person who presents the offering to the Lord shall bring as a meal offering: a tenth of a measure of choice flour with a quarter of a hin of oil mixed in.**

(5) **You shall also offer, with the burnt offering or the sacrifice, a quarter of a hin of wine as a libation for each sheep.**

(6) **In the case of a ram, you shall present as a meal offering: two-tenths of a measure of choice flour with a third of a hin of oil mixed in;**

(7) **and a third of a hin of wine as a libation – as an offering of pleasing odor to the Lord.**

(8) **And if it is an animal from the herd that you offer to the Lord as a burnt offering or as a sacrifice, in fulfillment of a vow explicitly uttered or as an offering of well-being,**

(9) **there shall be offered a meal offering along with the animal: three-tenths of a measure of choice flour with half a hin of oil mixed in;**

(10) **and as libation you shall offer half a hin of wine – these being offerings by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord.**

(11) **Thus shall be done with each ox, with each ram, and with any sheep or goat,**

(12) **as many as you offer; you shall do thus with each one, as many as there are.**

**(2) Speak to the Israelite people and say to them:** When you enter the land that I am giving you to settle in: Immediately after pronouncing the verdict, God tells the people what they should expect to happen at the end of the wilderness journey, when they come to the Land of Israel. That is, He gives them something to hope for and strive for. The generation that is to die in the wilderness can and must nonetheless feel confident that their children will enter the land, and knowing that, they will educate their children accordingly. That itself is a correction, and a basis for hope.

**(3) And would present an offering by fire ... producing an odor pleasing to the Lord:** An alternate translation is “to make a sweet savor unto the Lord.” This phrasing expresses the purity and integrity of the person bringing the sacrifice, and of his intentions in so doing.

**(4) The person who presents the offering to the Lord shall bring as a meal offering:** a tenth of a measure of choice flour with a quarter of a hin of oil mixed in: When we compare these laws with those of the sacrifices described in the book of Leviticus, we see that here there are additions of flour and oil, and libations of wine. This requirement applied only to sacrifices brought in the Land of Israel, but not in the wilderness.

**A tenth of a measure:** The Hebrew is more specific. This “measure” is an *efah*. A tenth of an *efah* is approximately 4 liters (3.6 dry quarts).

**With a quarter of a hin of oil mixed in:** About 1.5 liters (1.6 liquid quarts).

**(5) You shall also offer, with the burnt offering or the sacrifice, a quarter of a hin of wine as a libation for each sheep:** In the book of Leviticus (19:1 ff.), the Torah relates how Nadab and Abihu, the elder two of Aaron’s four sons, met with a violent death by immolation in retribution for having brought an incense offering that God had not commanded them to bring. The Midrash elaborates that Nadab and Abihu were in fact punished for having imbibed strong wine before performing the Temple service, which they did in order to induce in themselves an ecstatic, trancelike state.

It is strictly forbidden for priests to combine drinking wine (or other intoxicating beverages) with their performance of the Temple service. The reason is clear. Wine reduces inhibitions and obscures our moral sensibilities, whereas it is the priests who bear the responsibility of imparting the lessons of morality to the people. But in the Land of

Israel, wine plays an important role in worship, and although forbidden to the *kohanim*, “the priests,” it is an essential and integral component of the sacrifices.

The libations of wine represent the idea that a drink that is problematic to be had in the wilderness, is in the Land of Israel sacred and consecrated. Thus, the sanctity of the Land of Israel includes even such things that would seem to exceed the boundaries of holiness. It is therefore “a land flowing with milk and honey,” having the power to correct all the forces of the soul. It is a unique land, multifaceted and multi-dimensional, given to a unique people, the Jewish people, for elevating the real world.

Everything else that is brought up onto the altar – the grain offerings and sacrificial meat, in particular – are permitted to be eaten by the *kohanim*; only the wine that is poured onto the altar is forbidden to them at those times when they perform the Temple service. Thus, wine demonstrates a certain ambiguous quality, which, as noted earlier, is manifested also in the laws of the nazirite (Num. 6:1 ff.). During the period of his vow the nazirite is strictly forbidden to drink wine, but once the vow is complete, the nazirite *must* drink wine (see Num. 6:20).

It is no coincidence that the spies bring back grapes. They understand their importance, but are not able, due to the enormity of those grapes, to turn them into wine. In this sense, the libations of wine on the altar in the Land of Israel also symbolize atonement for the sin of the spies.

**(6-9) In the case of a ram, you shall present as a meal offering: two-tenths of a measure of choice flour with a third of a hin of oil mixed in; and a third of a hin of wine ... And if it is an animal from the herd ... there shall be offered a meal offering ... three-tenths of a measure of choice flour with half a hin of oil:** As the size of the sacrifice increases, the quantities of flour, oil, and wine that accompany it also increase.

§ 11.3. “ONE LAW FOR YOU AND FOR THE RESIDENT STRANGER” (15:13-16)

יג כִּלְהֵאזְרוּחַ יַעֲשֶׂה־בָּכֶּה אֶת־אֵלֶּה לְהִקְרִיב אִשָּׁה רִיח־נִיחֹחַ לַיהוָה וְכִי־יִגּוֹר אִתְּכֶם גֵּר אֹד אֲשֶׁר־בְּתוֹכְכֶם לְדַרְתֵיכֶם וְעָשָׂה אִשָּׁה רִיח־נִיחֹחַ לַיהוָה כְּאֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: טו הַקֹּהֵל חֻקָּה אַחַת לָכֶם וְלַגֵּר הַגֵּר חֻקֹת עוֹלָם לְדַרְתֵיכֶם כְּכֶם בְּגֵר יִהְיֶה לִפְנֵי יְיָ: טז תּוֹרָה אַחַת וּמִשְׁפָּט אֶחָד יִהְיֶה לָכֶם וְלַגֵּר הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם:

(13) Every citizen, when presenting an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord, shall do so with them.

(14) And when, throughout the ages, a stranger who has taken up residence with you, or one who lives among you, would present an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord—as you do, so shall it be done by

(15) the rest of the congregation. There shall be one law for you and for the resident stranger; it shall be a law for all time throughout the ages. You and the stranger shall be alike before the Lord;

(16) the same ritual and the same rule shall apply to you and to the stranger who resides among you.

In contrast to the Diaspora, where Jewish survival is the highest priority, and there is therefore a clear tendency toward isolation, in the Land of Israel accepting converts is a normal part of Jewish life. For this reason, “the stranger who has taken up residence with you, or one who lives among you” is mentioned here specifically, in connection with the sacrifices that will be brought in the Land of Israel, to emphasize that converts are an integral element of the community, enjoying equal rights with all other Jews in every area of religious and social life.

The libations of wine in these sacrifices are meant to demonstrate that the Land of Israel has the power to integrate into holiness even such things that are normally regarded as outside the realm of holiness.

And likewise, when a convert is received into the Jewish nation, an individual born outside the people of Israel has now been incorporated into it.

§ 11.4. *CHALLAH*, “THE DOUGH OFFERING” (15:17-21)

יְוַדְבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: יִתְּ דְבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם  
 בְּבָאֲכֶם אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְבִיא אֲתֶכֶם שָׁמָּה: יִטְוְהָיָה בְּאֲכֹלְכֶם  
 מִלֶּחֶם הָאָרֶץ תְּרִימוּ תְרוּמָה לַיְיָ: כִּי רָאִשִׁית עֲרֹסְתֶכֶם חֶלֶה תְרִימוּ  
 תְרוּמָה כְּתְרוּמַת גֶּרֶן בֵּן תְּרִימוּ אֹתָהּ: כֹּא מְרָאשִׁית עֲרֹסְתֶיכֶם תִּתְּנוּ  
 לַיְיָ תְרוּמָה לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם:

(17) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**

(18) **Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land to which I am taking you**

(19) **and you eat of the bread of the land, you shall set some aside as a gift to the Lord:**

(20) **as the first yield of your baking, you shall set aside a loaf as a gift; you shall set it aside as a gift like the gift from the threshing floor.**

(21) **You shall make a gift to the Lord from the first yield of your baking, throughout the ages.**

(18) **When you enter the land to which I am taking you:** Here the Torah continues the theme of consolation following the verdict of death in the wilderness, by prescribing a commandment that applies only in the Land of Israel. As if to say: although you will not reach the Land, your children surely will, and everything will end happily. They will have bread (i.e., sustenance) in abundance, and they will separate *challah* from it.

(19) **You shall set some aside as a gift to the Lord:**

The Hebrew word here for “gift” is *terumah*, which means “raising” or “uplifting.” That is, by separating a portion of the dough as a gift to God, we raise ordinary food to consecrated status.

(20) **As the first yield of your baking, you shall set aside a loaf as a gift:** This “loaf” (in Hebrew, *challah*) is that part of the dough that must be separated from it before the dough is baked into bread. That portion of the dough is then transferred to a *kohen*, one of the priests, as the “gift.”

**You shall set it aside as a gift like the gift from the threshing floor:** The word *terumah*, “a gift of uplifting,” appears here again. Thus, *terumah* is offered on this bread twice: first from the grain, which happens during the harvest, “from the threshing floor,” and then again, a second *terumah* gift, given when the grain has been ground into flour, and is baked into bread. The grain harvest – and the thanks given to God for it – occurs only once a year, but baking bread from that grain is a perennial activity.

True prosperity consists not merely in having a harvest once annually, but in never lacking food on one’s table. Therefore, the act of baking bread for one’s family must always include an expression of gratitude to the Almighty. The Almighty’s blessings will continue to descend upon that household commensurately to that feeling and expression of gratitude: “All the choice first fruits of every kind, and all the gifts of every kind – of all your contributions – shall go to the priests. You shall further give the first of the yield of your baking to the priest, that a blessing may rest upon your home” (Ezek. 44:30).

**(21) You shall make a gift to the Lord from the first yield of your baking, throughout the ages:** Literally, “for your generations.” Because this addition seems superfluous, the Tradition interprets it as follows. Since it has been established from the outset that this commandment of *challah* pertains to the Land of Israel specifically, this addition is saying that the commandment applies only when most Jews of the generation live inside the borders of the Land of Israel.

In these times, since the majority of the Jewish people lives outside the Land of Israel, the *challah* law is not binding, strictly speaking. However, the Sages decreed that in order that this commandment would not be entirely forgotten, a small piece of dough the size of an olive must always be separated from each kneading. And since the laws of ritual purity cannot be observed in our times, rather than giving this piece of dough to a *kohen*, it must be burnt.

§ 11.5. SINS COMMITTED UNWITTINGLY  
OR INTENTIONALLY (15:22-31)

כב וכי תִשְׁגּוּ וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת כָּל־הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יי אֵל־  
מֹשֶׁה: כג אַתָּה כָּל־אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי יי אֶלְיִכֶם בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה מִן־הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי  
יי וְהִלַּאתָ לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם: כד וְהָיָה אִם מְעִינֵי הָעֵדָה נַעֲשִׂתָה לְשִׁגְגָה וְעָשׂוּ  
כָל־הָעֵדָה פֶּר בּוֹזֶבֶק אֶחָד לְעֹלָה לְרִיחַ נִיחַח לַיי וּמִנְחָתוֹ וְנִסְכּוֹ  
כַּמִּשְׁפֵּט וּשְׂעִיר־עִזִּים אֶחָד לְחֹטֵת: כה וְכִפֶּר הַכֹּהֵן עַל־כָּל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנִסְלַח לָהֶם כִּי־שִׁגְגָה הוּא וְהֵם הֵבִיאוּ אֶת־קָרְבָּנָם אֲשֶׁה לַיי  
וְחִטָּאתָם לִפְנֵי יי עַל־שִׁגְגָתָם: כו וְנִסְלַח לְכָל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלַגֵּר  
הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכָם כִּי לְכָל־הָעָם בְּשִׁגְגָה:

כז וְאִם־נִפְשׁ אַחַת תַּחֲטֵא בְשִׁגְגָה וְהִקְרִיבָה עִז בַּת־שָׁנָתָה  
לְחֹטָאת: כח וְכִפֶּר הַכֹּהֵן עַל־הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַשֹּׁגְגָה בְּחֹטָאָה בְּשִׁגְגָה לִפְנֵי  
יי לְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיו וְנִסְלַח לוֹ: כט הָאֲזִרְחָ בְּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכָם  
תּוֹרָה אַחַת יִהְיֶה לָכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּשִׁגְגָה: ל וְהִנָּפֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר־תַּעֲשֶׂה | בְּיַד  
רָמָה מִן־הָאֲזִרְחָ וּמִן־הַגֵּר אֶת־יי הוּא מְגִדֶּךָ וְנִכְרַתָּה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא  
מִקִּרְבְּ עַמָּה: לא כִּי דִבַּר־יְיָ בְּזֶה וְאֶת־מִצְוֹתוֹ הִפְרָה הַכֹּרֶת | תִּכְרַת  
הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא עֹנָה בָּה:

(22) If you unwittingly fail to observe any one of the commandments that the Lord has declared to Moses

(23) – anything that the Lord has enjoined upon you through Moses – from the day that the Lord gave the commandment and on through the ages:

(24) If this was done unwittingly, through the inadvertence of the community, the whole community shall present one bull of the herd as a burnt offering of pleasing odor to the Lord, with its proper meal offering and libation, and one he-goat as a sin offering.

(25) The priest shall make expiation for the whole Israelite community and they shall be forgiven; for it was an error, and for their error they have brought their offering, an offering by fire to the Lord and their sin offering before the Lord.

(26) The whole Israelite community and the stranger residing among them shall be forgiven, for it happened to the entire people through error.

(27) **In case it is an individual who has sinned unwittingly, he shall offer a she-goat in its first year as a sin offering.**

(28) **The priest shall make expiation before the Lord on behalf of the person who erred, for he sinned unwittingly, making such expiation for him that he may be forgiven.**

(29) **For the citizen among the Israelites and for the stranger who resides among them – you shall have one ritual for anyone who acts in error.**

(30) **But the person, be he citizen or stranger, who acts defiantly reviles the Lord; that person shall be cut off from among his people.**

(31) **Because he has spurned the word of the Lord and violated His commandment, that person shall be cut off – he bears his guilt.**

(22) **If you unwittingly fail to observe any one of the commandments that the Lord has declared to Moses:** This too continues the same theme of consolation, by showing that it is possible to correct one's mistakes. It also emphasizes that despite the recent verdict that has alienated the Jews from the Almighty, all the commandments still remain in force.

**(22-23) If you unwittingly fail to observe any one of the commandments ... anything that the Lord has enjoined upon you through Moses:** Literally, "If you will not fulfill all these commandments, ... everything that the Lord has commanded you."

Strictly, this should be understood as a failure to fulfill *any one of* all the commandments. (Or its variant: the one particular commandment that is equal in weight to all the other commandments, namely, the prohibition of idolatry.)

But we can also understand the failure to observe "all these commandments" in the literal sense. Some future generation, due to a gross misunderstanding of the Torah, might fail to fulfill any of its commandments at all. Nevertheless, the Jews of even that generation will remain Jews in the fullest sense, and correction and Divine forgiveness will be possible even for them. (This is how the preeminent commentator *Ramban*, Nachmanides, understands these verses.)

**(26) The whole Israelite community and the stranger residing among them shall be forgiven, for it happened to the entire people through error:** This verse expresses a fundamental principle of Judaism, and was therefore chosen to open the synagogue service of Yom Kippur, leading immediately into *ma'ariv*, the evening prayer with which the most solemn day of the Jewish year officially begins.

**(27) In case it is an individual who has sinned unwittingly:** “Unwittingly” can of course mean that the person who committed the sin did so out of total ignorance of the given commandment – including ignorance that such a commandment even exists at all. However, it can also indicate a failure to understand the commandment’s significance or importance, which is often due to a lack of awareness of religious values in general, or other such personal limitations.

He shall offer a she-goat in its first year as a sin offering: As their sacrifice for a sin unknowingly committed, the community brings a bull, the symbol of strength and independence. But an individual brings a goat, a female animal from the herd which, in the symbolism of the sacrifices, represents not leading, but being led.

**(30-31) But the person ... who acts defiantly reviles the Lord; that person shall be cut off from among his people:** The punishment of *karet*, “being cut off, extirpated,” is incurred only by those who believe and understand the importance of the commandments, but violate them nonetheless – not only knowingly, but defiantly (literally here in the text, *be-yad ramah*, “with hand raised high”).

If, on the other hand, a person violates the commandments merely because he fails to understand their importance, or cannot bring himself to believe in the Divine origin of the Torah, or due to other such personal shortcomings, then this is an “unwitting,” not “defiant” violation. In such cases the violator does not incur the penalty of *karet*.

#### § 11.6. THE MAN FOUND GATHERING WOOD ON THE SABBATH DAY (15:32-36)

לֹב וְיָהִי בְּגִי'־יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּמִּדְבָּר וַיִּמְצְאוּ אִישׁ מִקְשֵׁשׁ עֵצִים בְּיוֹם  
הַשַּׁבָּת: לֹג וַיִּקְרִיבוּ אֹתוֹ הַמְּצֹאִים אֹתוֹ מִקְשֵׁשׁ עֵצִים אֶל־מִשְׁחָה

וְאֶל־אֶהֱרֹן וְאֶל כָּל־הָעֵדָה: לֵד וַיִּנָּיְחוּ אֹתוֹ בַּמִּשְׁמֶר כִּי לֹא פָרַשׁ  
מִה־יַעֲשֶׂה לּוֹ:

לֹה וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מוֹת יוֹמַת הָאִישׁ רְגוֹם אֹתוֹ בְּאֲבָנִים כָּל־הָעֵדָה  
מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה: לֹה וַיֵּצִיאוּ אֹתוֹ כָּל־הָעֵדָה אֶל־מַחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּרְגְּמוּ  
אֹתוֹ בְּאֲבָנִים וַיָּמָת בְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי אֶת־מֹשֶׁה:

לֹה וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: לֹח דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאִמְרַתְּ אֲלֵהֶם  
וְעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצֵת עַל־כִּנְפֵי בְגָדֵיהֶם לְדָרְתָם וַנִּתְּנוּ עַל־צִיצֵת הַכֹּהֵן  
פְּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת:

**(32) Once, when the Israelites were in the wilderness, they came upon a man gathering wood on the sabbath day.**

**(33) Those who found him as he was gathering wood brought him before Moses, Aaron, and the whole community.**

**(34) He was placed in custody, for it had not been specified what should be done to him.**

**(35) Then the Lord said to Moses, “The man shall be put to death: the whole community shall pelt him with stones outside the camp.”**

**(36) So the whole community took him outside the camp and stoned him to death – as the Lord had commanded Moses.**

**(32) Once, when the Israelites were in the wilderness:** The main points of these passages are as follows:

(i) God promises that the Jewish nation will come to the Land of Israel.

(ii) It is possible to rectify one’s sins.

(iii) The commandments remain in force in the wilderness even after the forty-year decree has been handed down.

Taken together, all of the above serves as consolation following the decree of forty years of wanderings and death in the wilderness for that generation.

**They came upon a man:** Tradition informs us that this man was Zelophehad, a descendant of Manasseh, Joseph's son. The story of Zelophehad's daughters, and the legal action they brought in defense of their right to inherit their father, will be told later (Num. 27:1 ff.).

**Gathering wood on the sabbath day:** In connection with the falling of the manna the prohibition was explicitly stated: "Mark that the Lord has given you the sabbath; therefore He gives you two days' food on the sixth day. Let everyone remain where he is: let no one leave his place on the seventh day" (Exod. 16:29). Thus, the law was clear, that going out to gather in the field was strictly forbidden.

Although the Torah also establishes in a number of other places (see, e.g., Exod. 31:14-15) that the punishment imposed for wanton violation of the Sabbath is the death penalty, this incident here is the only case in all of Jewish history that that punishment was actually carried out for violation of the Sabbath.

**(33) Those who found him as he was gathering wood:** This phrase seems redundant, telling us nothing that we do not already know from the previous verse. But in fact, the repetition highlights a critical condition that must be met in order for the death penalty to be carried out for any capital offense in the Torah. Namely: at least two witnesses must warn the perpetrator *immediately* before he commits the crime that the action he is about to undertake is forbidden by the Torah, and that he will incur the death penalty if he proceeds to commit the crime. Unless this condition has been met, no death penalty can ever be imposed.

Thus, the seemingly redundant phrasing of this verse ("They came upon a man gathering wood on the sabbath day ... Those who found him as he was gathering wood brought him ...") is to be understood as assuring us that that condition was in fact met in this case. Zelophehad had been clearly warned of the dire consequences he would face if he would not cease and desist from gathering wood on the Sabbath, but he ignored the warning and continued committing the forbidden act.

Zelophehad's behavior seems to make no sense. The life of the Jewish nation in the wilderness clearly proceeded under direct Divine intervention, which provided the people with all their basic needs. There was no heating problem (at least so far as we know). Wood

might be needed for cooking or baking the manna (see Exod. 16:23 and Num. 11:8). However, despite there was an option to do so, there was no actual need, because the manna could always be eaten raw. Thus, Zelophehad's violation of the Sabbath was not motivated by any practical need, but was an act of demonstrative defiance as described just above.

**(34) He was placed in custody, for it had not been specified what should be done to him:** The people are at a loss to understand why Zelophehad is behaving this way.

**(35-36) Then the Lord said to Moses, “The man shall be put to death ... [they] took him outside the camp and stoned him to death:** The Torah does not elaborate on why this man acted so strangely. We shall presently explain the reason for this omission.

The Midrash avers that this was a case of “self-sacrifice for the sake of the Torah” – a special situation in which a fundamental commandment of the Torah is intentionally violated in order to restore and reinforce the people's connection with the Almighty. In other words, Zelophehad wished to demonstrate to his fellow Jews that the Torah and its commandments were still fully binding, and thus to provide them with a safeguard against distancing themselves from God's word.

As already noted, the decree that this generation would not enter the Land of Israel raised an important question in the minds of the people: should they continue to observe the commandments of the Torah?

Indeed, the Torah can be fully and truly realized only in the Land of Israel. The wording of many of the commandments explicitly mentions that those commandments are intended to be implemented when the nation is living on their land. If so, perhaps this generation, the generation of the wilderness that would never see the land of Israel, was no longer bound to keep the commandments – to observe the Sabbath, for example?

Zelophehad wanted to demonstrate to the people by his own example, through self-sacrifice in the literal sense, that the commandments had not lost their relevancy, and that the obligation to fulfill them remained intact. This incident had a critical impact on

that generation. But since violating a commandment with a religiously positive objective itself is very problematic, the Torah does not openly reveal the details of this story, nor, in particular, Zelophehad's motivation for acting as he did.

With this reading of the execution of the man who desecrated the Sabbath by collecting firewood, which we now see as yet another source of moral support for the people who would now be wandering in the wilderness for forty years, we have been given an understanding of the episode that corresponds to the general conceptual framework of this Torah portion.

#### § 11.7. THE COMMANDMENT OF *TZITZIT* (15:37-41)

וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: לֹחַ דִּבְרֵי אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם וַעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצֵת עַל-כַּנְּפֵי בְגָדֵיהֶם לְדֹרֹתָם וְנִתְּנוּ עַל-צִיצֵת הַכַּנָּף פֶּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת: לֹט וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצֵת וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹת יְיָ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא-תִתְּוּרוּ אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר-אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם: מִלְּמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתַי וְהָיִיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם: מֵאֲנִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם מִצְרַיִם לָכֶם לֵהָיוֹת לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים אֲנִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

(37) **The Lord said to Moses as follows:**

(38) **Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner.**

(39) **That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge.**

(40) **Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God.**

(41) **I the Lord am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I, the Lord your God.**

**(38) Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes:** The word *tzitzit* is etymologically related to “dangling (threads).” Or with “peering.” (Cf. Songs of Songs 2:9: “My beloved is like a gazelle ... peering [*meitzitz*] through the lattice.”) The latter meaning is appropriate here, because looking at the *tzitzit* is an important aspect of the commandment (Num. 15:39). For that very reason, the term *tzitzit* is sometimes translated as “show-fringes.”

**On the corners of their garments:** Clothing in general performs a variety of essential functions, as any study of the history of human civilization makes clear. One of those functions is helping a person to position himself in society by creating for him his own unique personal image.

Likewise, Jewish clothing in particular must convey – both to the person himself and to others – a clear message about the pursuit of holiness. This is the function performed by the *tzitzit*.

**Let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner:** That is, although the fringes start out completely white, a special sky-blue thread is then inserted among them. The symbolism is that into ordinary life, which is “white,” a “blue” thread of celestial holiness must be added.

It would be wrong for the fringes to be *completely* blue, because that would indicate an attitude concerned only with holiness, to the exclusion of all else – that is, a disregard for ordinary life. If we entertain such an attitude we cannot possibly improve the world.

The colors of the flag of the State of Israel, sky-blue and white, derive directly from these Torah verses about the colors of the *tzitzit*. The historical origins of that flag design are in the *tallit*, the rectangular, traditional prayer shawl worn daily by Jewish men during the morning prayer service and on other special occasions.

As prescribed here in the Torah, every *tallit* has *tzitzit* on each of its four corners. Because *tzitzit* are mandated by the Torah only for rectangular garments, which in modern cultures have all but disappeared, daily use of the *tallit* in the synagogue and during morning prayer was instituted in Judaism to assure that the mitzvah of *tzitzit* would never be forgotten.

**A cord of blue:** The Hebrew here for “blue” is *techelet*.

*Techelet* is a blue-violet or turquoise dye that was highly prized by ancient Mediterranean civilizations. It was used in the priestly garments and in the tapestries of the Tabernacle as described in the book of Exodus. The name *techelet* seems closely related to *tachlit*, the Hebrew word for “purpose, objective, or aspiration.”

The opposite color on the color spectrum, *adom*, “red,” is understood in Jewish tradition as the color of materiality (related to *adamah*, “earth”). Thus, the full color spectrum runs the gamut from *adom* to *techelet*, from earth to heaven, from materiality to spiritual aspiration.

Says the Midrash about this color: “The blue *techelet* of the *tzitzit* resembles the color of the sea. The color of the sea resembles that of the sky. The sky shines with the color of sapphire. And the shine of sapphire resembles the radiance of the Throne of Glory of the Almighty Who sits on High.”<sup>55</sup>

This statement develops a chain of similarities in images that lead from the nethermost reaches of our personal existence that begins from the hem of our clothing (that aspect of our humanity that sits furthest away from us), then to and through the sea (representing the surrounding world that seethes with a multitude of highly diverse elements), from there to the sky (the values and attitudes that we apply to ordinary life), and, finally, reaching up to the Almighty’s Throne of Glory. Thus we are given a clear sense of God’s presence at each and every ascending stage of reality.

Every human being has a *neshamah*, “a Divine soul,” which is clothed within yet another, “ordinary soul” – the *nefesh* – which is in turn clothed inside the body, which is clothed in actual, physical garments. Finally, at the outermost extremity is the *tzitzit*, a thread that is tied to the most distant hem of the person’s garment. And even there, in this thread, we declare our awareness of our connection with God Who is the Origin of all things – our connection with the Throne of Divine Glory.

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<sup>55</sup> The reference is to Exod. 24:10: “And they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity.”

**Throughout the ages:** The correct dye for making the *techelet* must be extracted from a sea creature known as the *chilazon*, a certain kind of mollusk. Around 600 CE Byzantine emperors banned the Jews from producing *techelet*, proclaiming that they were thenceforth reserving exclusive rights to all *chilazon* dye, which they needed for producing royal purple (likewise derived from the same mollusk dye as *techelet*, but through the application of a somewhat different technology). For many centuries thereafter the threads of all *tzitzit* were therefore always just pure white, and the technology of *techelet* production for *tzitzit* was eventually lost.

In recent decades, however, with the return of authentic Jewish life to the Land of Israel, the production and use of *techelet* have been restored as well. This restoration is not yet fully recognized by all leading rabbinical authorities, the majority of whom even today insist on keeping their *tzitzit* only pure white. Gradually, however, more and more Jews are embracing the restoration of *techelet* in their *tzitzit*, which means that (in all due respect to the rabbinical decisors) the advance is coming, as it often does, “from below” – that is, from among the people themselves.

**A cord of blue:** Tradition informs us that the name *techelet* refers not only to thread of a particular color, but also to the material from which it is made, namely, wool.

The Torah explicitly forbids wearing a garment in which wool and flax (linen) have been combined. The Torah in two places (Lev. 19:19; Deut. 22:11) calls such a combination *sha’atnez* – a word of uncertain origin, but which in Jewish tradition came to mean “the admixture of linen and wool” itself, and also “the prohibition of wearing” it.

Wool is the product of sheep-herding, a predominantly Jewish occupation, while flax is produced through agriculture, a characteristically Egyptian pursuit. The prohibition of *sha’atnez* can therefore be seen as an injunction against combining Jewish and Egyptian influences, i.e., against allowing Egypt’s notoriously negative influences to infiltrate Jewish life (cf. Lev. 18:3).

Now, since Tradition requires, as noted above, that the blue strand of the *tzitzit* be made of wool, this means that if a garment and also the white strands of its *tzitzit* are all made of linen, the blue *techelet* strand

that is inserted must nonetheless be made of wool – which then renders the garment unequivocally *sha'atnez*. In other words, the prohibition of *sha'atnez* does not apply to *tzitzit*.

Moreover, in the Temple wool and linen were allowed to be combined in the priestly garments. I.e., at the level of ordinary life any such admixture is prohibited, but at the level of the sanctity of the Temple, it is permitted. And similarly with respect to the use of fire on *shabbat*. In the Temple wood would be added to the fire on the altar even on the Sabbath, just as was done on every other day of the week. Thus we see that there is unity in the upper world, while separation is necessary in the lower world.

This dual view – that all things, although superficially separated, are ultimately connected at their root – deepens our understanding of the structure of the universe. If we fail to acknowledge the fundamental connection of all things, we will see the world around us in black and white, which will lead us to choose dualism over monotheism.

But if we make the opposite mistake, by forgetting that in real life there must be separation, as did Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when they partook prematurely of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, we will ultimately destroy the world.

Given that an admixture of wool and linen exists in both the Temple and in the *tzitzit* (potentially), the *tzitzit* can also be perceived in some sense as representing the Temple fastened, as it were, to the corners of Jewish clothing.

**(39) That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them:** Because you will acknowledge the meaning of the commandments as an instrument of advancement toward holiness, this will follow naturally.

**So that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge:** The Hebrew here for “follow,” is *taturu*, from the verbal root *tur*, which was also used to describe the activity of the spies (Num. 13:21, 35). It denotes an act of scouting – wandering for the purpose of carrying out an investigation.

Thus, the commandment of *tzitzit* with which weekly portion *Sh'lach* now concludes is connected with the episode of the spies who were sent “to scout the land” – the primary topic of this weekly portion. The scouts

chose to stray, to follow their heart and eyes, instead of focusing on the higher goal. And the *tzitzit* serves to correct this error.

The Torah mentions *tzitzit* as the last in the series of commandments that serve as consolations associated with the Land of Israel – because it is only there that natural life imbued with the holiness inextricably contained within it is possible.

In the *tzitzit* is embodied the idea of connecting nature with that which transcends nature. But in *galut*, “the exile,” those two are separated: nature is excluded from the field of holiness, while holiness transcends nature. This is the reason that the sky-blue *techelet* could not be intermingled with white in the *galut*, and the *tzitzit* fringes had to be completely white. Only upon returning to the Land of Israel do the *tzitzit* gradually reacquire their correct color.

**So that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge:** The refusal of the scouts to conquer the land, and their willingness to live instead in other countries and among other nations, is here likened to fornication.

**(40) Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God:** The commandments are important not *per se*, but only as a tool for advancing the people toward holiness. Only this view of the commandments can serve as a correct basis for their proper observance.

**(41) I the Lord am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God:** The goal of the Exodus for the Jewish people was to establish their direct connection to God.

**I the Lord am your God, who brought you out ... I, the Lord your God:** The purpose of the repetition here is to emphasize that this aspect is completely non-negotiable. Thus there is an element of coercion here. But when dealing with the wilderness generation God could not do otherwise.



**WEEKLY  
PORTION 5**

# **KORACH**



## § 12. KORAH'S REBELLION

### § 12.1. THE REBELLION BEGINS (16:1-19)

א וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח בֶּן־צִיְהֹרָה בֶּן־קֹהֵת בֶּן־לֵוִי וְדָתָן וְאָבִירָם בְּנֵי אֵלִיאָב וְאוֹן  
בֶּן־פִּלֹת בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן: ב וַיִּקְמוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאֲנָשִׁים מִבְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמִשִּׁים  
וּמְאַתָּים נְשִׂאֵי עֵדָה קְרָאִי מוֹעֵד אֲנָשֵׁי־שֵׁם: ג וַיִּקְהֲלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־  
אֹהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לָכֶם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה כָּלֶם קְדָשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם יִי  
וּמִדּוֹעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קֹהֵל יי: ד וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיַּפֵּל עַל־פָּנָיו: ה וַיִּדְבֹר  
אֶל־קֹרַח וְאֶל־כָּל־עֵדְתוֹ לֵאמֹר בְּקֹר וַיִּדַע יי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ וְאֶת־  
הַקְּדוֹשׁ וְהַקְּרִיב אֵלָיו וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר־בוּ יִקְרִיב אֵלָיו: ו זֹאת עָשׂוּ  
קְחוּ־לָכֶם מַחְתָּוֹת קֹרַח וְכָל־עֵדְתוֹ: ז וַתָּנוּ בָהֶן | אֵשׁ וְשִׁימוּ עֲלֵיהֶן |  
קִטְרֶת לִפְנֵי יי מִחֹר וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־יִבְחַר יי הוּא הַקְּדוֹשׁ רַב־  
לָכֶם בְּנֵי לְוִי: ח וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־קֹרַח שְׁמַעוּנָא בְּנֵי לְוִי: ט הַמַּעֲט  
מִכֶּם כִּי־הִבְדִּיל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעֵדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם  
אֵלָיו לַעֲבֹד אֶת־עַבְדֹת מִשְׁכַּן יי וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדָה לְשִׁרְתָּם: י וַיִּקְרַב  
אֹתָם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲחֵיהֶם בְּנֵי־לְוִי אֹתָם וּבִקְשָׁתֶם גַּם־כֹּהֲנָה: יא לָכֵן  
אִתָּה וְכָל־עֵדְתָם הַנֹּעֲדִים עֲלֵי יי וְאֹהֲרֹן מֵהָיָה כִּי תִלוּנוּ (תְּלִינוּ)  
עֲלֵיו: יב וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה לִקְרֹא לְדָתָן וְלָאֲבִירָם בְּנֵי אֵלִיאָב וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא  
נֵעַלָה: יג הַמַּעֲט כִּי הֵעֲלִיתָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ זְבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבַשׁ לְהִמִּיתָנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר  
כִּי־תִשְׁתַּרְרַר עֲלֵינוּ גַם־הַשְׁתַּרְרָר: יד אֵף לֹא אֶל־אֶרֶץ זְבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבַשׁ  
הִבִּיאָתָנוּ וְתִתֵּן־לָנוּ נַחֲלֹת שָׂדֵה וְכָרְם הַעֵינִי הָאֲנָשִׁים הָהֵם תִּנְקַר  
לֹא נֵעַלָה: טו וַיַּחַר לְמֹשֶׁה מְאֹד וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־יי אֶל־תִּפְּן אֶל־מִנְחַתְּם לֹא  
חִמּוֹר אֶחָד מֵהֶם נִשְׂאָתִי וְלֹא הִרְעִיתִי אֶת־אֶחָד מֵהֶם: טז וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה

אֶל-קֹרַח אֶתָּהּ וְכָל-עֲדֹתָיִךְ הָיוּ לִפְנֵי יְיָ אֶתָּה וְהֵם וְאַהֲרֹן מִחֵר: י וַיִּקְחוּ |  
 אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ וַנִּתְּתֶם עֲלֵיהֶם קִטְרֹת וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם לִפְנֵי יְיָ אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ  
 חֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאֲתָיִים מִחֶתְתּוֹ וְאַתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ: יא וַיִּקְחוּ אִישׁ  
 מִחֶתְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ עֲלֵיהֶם אֵשׁ וַיִּשְׂמוּ עֲלֵיהֶם קִטְרֹת וַיַּעֲמְדוּ פֶתַח אֹהֶל  
 מוֹעֵד וּמִשָּׁה וְאַהֲרֹן: יט וַיִּקְהַל עֲלֵיהֶם קֹרַח אֶת-כָּל-הָעֵדָה אֶל-פֶּתַח  
 אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּרְא כְבוֹד-יְיָ אֶל-כָּל-הָעֵדָה:

(1) Now Korah, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth – descendants of Reuben –

(2) to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute.

(3) They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s congregation?”

(4) When Moses heard this, he fell on his face.

(5) Then he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, “Come morning, the Lord will make known who is His and who is holy, and will grant him access to Himself; He will grant access to the one He has chosen.

(6) Do this: You, Korah and all your band, take fire pans,

(7) and tomorrow put fire in them and lay incense on them before the Lord. Then the man whom the Lord chooses, he shall be the holy one. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!”

(8) Moses said further to Korah, “Hear me, sons of Levi.

(9) Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you access to Him, to perform the duties of the Lord’s Tabernacle and to minister to the community and serve them?

(10) Now that He has advanced you and all your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too?

(11) Truly, it is against the Lord that you and all your company have banded together. For who is Aaron that you should rail against him?”

(12) **Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab; but they said, "We will not come!**

(13) **Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us?**

(14) **Even if you had brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, and given us possession of fields and vineyards, should you gouge out those men's eyes? We will not come!"**

(15) **Moses was much aggrieved and he said to the Lord, "Pay no regard to their oblation. I have not taken the ass of any one of them, nor have I wronged any one of them."**

(16) **And Moses said to Korah, "Tomorrow, you and all your company appear before the Lord, you and they and Aaron.**

(17) **Each of you take his fire pan and lay incense on it, and each of you bring his fire pan before the Lord, two hundred and fifty fire pans; you and Aaron also [bring] your fire pans."**

(18) **Each of them took his fire pan, put fire in it, laid incense on it, and took his place at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, as did Moses and Aaron.**

(19) **Korah gathered the whole community against them at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. Then the Presence of the Lord appeared to the whole community,**

As we know, the sequence of events as the Torah recounts them does not always correspond to the actual chronology of their occurrence. And here, too, there are varying opinions among the commentators as to when Korah's rebellion actually took place. Did it begin after the incident of the golden calf, or immediately after the appointment of the Levites to their new, special status, or after the episode of the scouts?

In order to comprehend the ideas that the Torah wishes to convey, our first obligation is to understand its passages in the exact sequence in which they are presented to us. With this in mind, we must understand Korah's rebellion as the direct consequence of the failed intelligence mission of the scouts, and of God's decree that condemned the nation to forty years of wanderings in the wilderness.

As previously noted, the entire book of Numbers is essentially an account of the various crises that a new generation of Jews must overcome, a process that serves to reeducate them for living independently in their land. The order of presentation and discussion of the events therefore corresponds to the order of that correction. First, weekly portion Naso covered the problems faced by individuals. Then, in the *Behalotecha* portion we read about problems relating to the Torah. In *Sh'lach* – problems concerning the Land of Israel. And now we come to weekly portion *Korach*, which speaks of problems concerning the nation's leadership hierarchy.

The second of the two parts of the book of Numbers will then follow, in which there is a topical transition to the problems that the Jewish nation faces in its relationship to the nations of the world. Those issues will be discussed later in this volume, in part 2 of this *Bible Dynamics* commentary on the book of Numbers.

**Now Korah ... betook himself:** This use of the word *vayikach*, with which this episode begins, is rather unusual, mostly because the verbal root from which this word derives, *L-K-CH*, “to take,” would almost always be followed by a direct object, to indicate the thing that was taken. But that is totally lacking here. What, then, did Korah actually take?

Therefore, *vayikach* in this context is understood to mean that Korah betook *himself* to behave adversarially toward Moses. Or, that Korah brought many others over to his side in support of his campaign. (He “took” them, i.e., he persuaded them, with words.)

**Korah, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi:** The fact that Korah's lineage is enumerated here in detail leads the Midrash to conclude that that lineage was itself the motivation behind Korah's challenge. Korah's grandfather Kohath had four sons: Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel (Exod. 6:18). And Izhar was older than Uzziel. Korah therefore resented having been passed over for the position of chieftain of the Kohathites, which had been given instead to Korah's cousin, Elizaphan the son of Uzziel (see Num. 3:30), notwithstanding that Korah was his genealogical superior.

**Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab:** As we shall soon see (Num. 16:12 ff.), these two will position themselves against Moses as profes-

sional demagogues – even as the leading villains in this story. The Midrash therefore believes that the two quarreling Hebrews who were responsible for Moses' flight from Egypt to Midian early in his career were none other than these same two scoundrels, Dathan and Abiram: "When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, 'Why do you strike your fellow?' He retorted, 'Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?'" (Exod. 2:13 ff.). The Midrash sees both of these incidents as examples of extreme demagoguery, and therefore links the two incidents as having been perpetrated by the same two evildoers.

**Descendants of Reuben:** Like Korah, the tribe of Reuben also believed it had been deprived of its due, because Reuben was the oldest of Jacob's twelve sons, but the leadership of the Jewish nation was given to Judah.

Moreover, in the order of marching and encampment in the wilderness Reuben's camp was located on the south, adjacent to the Kohathites, whose position, like Reuben's, was south of the Tabernacle. Because of this physical proximity, the Reubenites were influenced to join Korah's rebellion, thus demonstrating, as the Midrash notes, the truth of the adage: "Woe to the wicked, and woe to his neighbor too!"

**On son of Peleth:** Since there is no further mention of him in the episode, the Midrash believes that although On had been one of the initiators of the rebellion, he soon thereafter backed down and removed himself from it.

The Midrash explains that it was On's wife who influenced him to that decision. She pointed out to her husband that regardless of whether the leader of the people would be Moses or Korah, On's participation in the rebellion could bring him no personal benefit of any kind.

The Midrash goes on to say that after On's wife had persuaded him not to leave their tent, she then took up her position outside the opening of the tent with her hair completely loosed and uncovered, which for a married woman was considered extremely immodest behavior (see Num. 5:18). When On's collaborators, concerned by his failure to appear, came to call on him, they found On's "unchaste" wife sitting at the entrance to the tent, and recoiled from any further involvement with On, citing

the lack of religious modesty in his family. Thanks to this intervention by On's wife, he survived.

**(2) To rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute:** Nachmanides contends that these two hundred and fifty Israelites were the firstborns (of all the tribes), who took issue with the loss of their special status when the Levites took the place of the firstborns in the Temple service.

It is to them that Moses will propose to take fire pans of incense (as they had done before as the firstborns) and attempt to approach the Sanctuary. When the attempt fails, the people will finally feel convinced that the firstborns have been legitimately removed from the Temple service.

Thus, wide swathes of society were involved in the rebellion, but they were not united in their demands. Each of the three groups – Korah and the Kohathites close to him, the Reubenites, and the firstborns of all the tribes – had its own motivations for joining the rebellion. But they were all united by a common feeling of deprivation. And since the actions of these groups took different forms, they were also punished differently.

**(3) They combined against Moses and Aaron:** “Against Moses and Aaron,” but not against the Almighty. (As we shall see, they were motivated by concerns that were spiritually correct and valid – in principle, at least.)

**And said to them, “You have gone too far!”:** They mean to say: “You have appropriated too many high positions for yourselves. After assuming the role of royalty, Moses should not have then also appointed his brother Aaron as High Priest.”

Such was their allegation. Now, in this case such an accusation was of course unfounded, since all the appointments had been decided not by Moses, but by the will of the Almighty. Nevertheless, for the general case – an ordinary system of government – what they were saying was quite correct.

**For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord's**

**congregation?:** All the elements of Korah's position – his rejection of the concentration of power in a single family, emphasis on the sanctity of the entire community, and disallowing one small group to have dominion over the entire Jewish nation – are not only correct, but even reflect a lofty ideal in Judaism, the Messianic ideal. However, for Korah and his followers to assert this position as an immediate political demand at this time is both fallacious and destructive.

The difference between Korah's rebellion and the previous crises in this book of Numbers is that Korah does not oppose God or His commandments, nor does he call for a mass return to Egypt, or the like. Simply put, this is not a demand to diminish holiness; quite the contrary, it is a demand to maximize holiness. The Midrash summarizes Korah's ideas with the following story.

Korah had his followers dress themselves in garments made entirely of *techelet* (the sky-blue wool of which one strand must be inserted into the *tzitzit* on each corner of a four-cornered garment). They then came and stood before Moses, and posed to him the following query. "If a garment, such as the ones you see us wearing, consists entirely of *techelet*, is it subject to the law of *tzitzit* or is it exempt?" To which Moses replied: "Such a garment requires *tzitzit* like any other." Whereupon they began to jeer at him: "How is that possible? If, in a garment made of any other material, just one *techelet* strand exempts the entire garment, how can it be that a garment made entirely of *techelet* does not exempt itself?"

In other words: how can just a single thread in the garment carry more weight than the entire garment?

Although the condition of "all the community are holy, all of them" (Num. 16:3) – i.e., the entire garment is *techelet* – is indeed Judaism's ideal, this level can be attained only in the Messianic era that lies in the future. But since the Messiah is not yet here, the closest we can come to that for now is a single strand of *techelet* that points to the Messianic times as the goal to which Judaism strives. Thus, Korah's ideology can be characterized as false messianism – a premature proclamation of the Messiah's arrival.

The Midrash asks: what actually made Korah decide to stage a rebellion? Dathan and Abiram were plain villains. And the two hundred and

fifty eminent individuals were naive romantics who yearned to bring fire pan offerings without thinking about the consequences. But how could Korah, obviously a highly intelligent man, oppose Moses?

The Midrash answers that Korah had experienced a vision. He saw a long chain of descendants in his future, including the prophet Samuel and various authors of the Psalms.<sup>56</sup> All of which led Korah to conclude that it was not his destiny to yield to Moses. And this vision was in fact accurate, except that Korah misinterpreted it.

Although the rebellion will ultimately fail, Korah's sons will survive (Num. 26:12), but only because they left him in time. Thus, Korah's rebellion is an example of how false messianism sometimes derives from the misinterpretation of visions and ideas that are themselves correct.

**For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst:** The Torah here is describing holiness as the goal – the direction in which things *should* be moving<sup>57</sup> – but by no means the actual state of affairs that obtains at that moment.

In Korah's ideology (as in any demagoguery in general), there is a combination of truth and falsehood. Korah emphasizes only one side of reality, without mentioning the other. Indeed, there is a potential for holiness in every person. But it is no more than a potential and an opportunity, which, in order to be realized, requires a great deal of effort if the person is to rise to that level.

Thus, it is not quite true that “all the community are holy,” but only that they are *potentially* holy. And it is precisely in order to enable that advancement that the national hierarchy of different levels must be preserved – a variance of potentials that allows the “current” to flow and movement to occur. In order to advance the people to holiness, it is

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<sup>56</sup> See Ps. 42-49, 99:6 and 1 Chron. 25:5.

<sup>57</sup> For example, at the end of the immediately preceding chapter, with reference to the commandment of tzitzit, we read: “Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God” (Num. 15:40). This could be translated more literally as, “... and to *become* holy to your God.” And likewise in Leviticus (19:2): “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy,” can be translated as, “You shall *become* holy.”

therefore essential that Moses, Aaron, the *kohanim*, and the Levites have a higher status than that of the rest of the people.

**(4) When Moses heard this, he fell on his face:** Given that the entire community along with Korah is demanding that Moses resign as the leader of the nation, Moses cannot continue his endeavors in the manner he has until now.

**(5) Then he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, “Come morning, the Lord will make known who is His and who is holy, and will grant him access to Himself; He will grant access to the one He has chosen:** Because Moses has been accused of unlawful appropriation of power, he transfers the decision into the hands of the Almighty.

**The Lord will make known who is His and who is holy:** The criterion for determining each person’s “level of holiness” is their openness to engaging in dialogue with God, which is in turn indicative of the level of closeness to Him. Thus, Moses is saying: when you all come to participate in an encounter with the Almighty, the level of holiness of each participant will be revealed.

**(6) Do this: You, Korah and all your band, take fire pans:** A fire pan is a metal instrument with a handle, designed for safely holding hot coals, upon which an incense offering is brought.

The way this works is more clearly laid out in the description of the incense brought by the High Priest as part of the Yom Kippur service:

“He shall take a panful of glowing coals scooped from the altar ... and two handfuls of finely ground aromatic incense ... He shall put the incense on the fire so that the cloud from the incense screens ... [the Ark]” (Lev. 16:12-13).

Putting the incense “on the fire” means placing it directly on top of the hot coals that are in the fire pan. When the incense powder comes in contact with the hot coals, this causes a smoky cloud of incense to rise into the air. (The incense “cloud” was thick enough to obscure visibility, hence the “screening” of the ark mentioned in that verse.)

**Do this: You, Korah and all your band:** Earlier, before the Temple service was taken from the firstborns and given instead to the Levites, these same people had brought incense offerings in their capacity as

firstborns. Therefore, an incense offering is now used as a test of whom the Almighty had chosen to serve Him – the firstborns or the *kohanim*. After the death of Nadab and Abihu who were punished for bringing an incense offering that God had not commanded them to bring (Lev. 10:1 ff.), it was clear to everyone that this was a mortal risk. But these firstborns were willing to take that chance.

**(7) And tomorrow put fire in them and lay incense on them before the Lord:** As part of the regular Temple service, incense was brought twice daily, morning and afternoon (Exod. 30:7-8). The incense offering mentioned here is the usual morning incense.

You have gone too far, sons of Levi!: Be satisfied with the status you have been granted. Because your demand for more will only be your downfall.

**(8-11) Moses said further to Korah, “Hear me, sons of Levi. ... Truly, it is against the Lord that you and all your company have banded together. For who is Aaron that you should rail against him?”:** Because Korah uses religious slogans – calls for greater holiness – to attract followers, Moses makes it clear to the Levites that their rebellion is nonetheless a rebellion against God. Moses is hoping that with this realization he can influence at least some of Korah’s followers to withdraw from the rebellion.

**(12) Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab:** Now Moses turns his attention to the second rebel faction, Dathan and Abiram, who oppose Moses’ political (not religious) power.

**(13) Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us?:** Dathan and Abiram belong to the tribe of Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn son, and they consider Moses’ political power unlawful.

**(14) Even if you had brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, and given us possession of fields and vineyards, should you gouge out those men’s eyes?:** They speak the truth: indeed, the people cannot and will not reach the Land of Israel. And they blame Moses for this failure.

**We will not come!:** Literally, “We will not ascend!” The Midrash sees in these words not only their straightforward meaning (“No, Moses, don’t expect us to come at your bidding!”), but also a clarification of why Dathan and Abiram are destined to fall, namely: they refuse on principle to “ascend” to the Land of Israel. (Even today, leaving the Diaspora to live in Israel is called *aliyah*, ascent, because “the Land of Israel is higher than all other lands.” See Talmud, Kiddushin 69a.)

**(15) Moses was much aggrieved: They have told a partial truth:** Moses is unable to lead the nation into its land. These words are especially bitter for Moses to hear.

**And he said to the Lord, “Pay no regard to their oblation:** This is to be understood as “do not accept their position.” I.e., do not agree with even that part of their arguments that is correct.

**I have not taken the ass of any one of them, nor have I wronged any one of them:** Literally, “nor have I caused any evil to befall them.”

But we wonder: as Moses is here appealing to God to not accept Dathan and Abiram’s offerings (arguments), his statements justifying his own behavior seem rather strange. Surely the Almighty already knows that Moses has always conducted himself with honesty and dignity, and that the accusations that Dathan and Abiram have leveled against him are unfounded. Why must Moses state all this explicitly?

The reason for this appeal seems to lie in the psychological crisis that Moses is now experiencing, and in his need to confirm in his own mind the validity of imputing responsibility for the nation’s misfortune to forces outside of himself. He therefore stresses that he has never conducted himself in the manner of a ruler who reserves the right to expropriate from his subjects any property he feels he must have in order to lead them.

In other words, Moses is saying that in no way does he see himself as a leader who wields supreme authority. Thus, whatever “evil” has befallen the people (specifically, their now inevitable death in the wilderness, for which Dathan and Abiram are trying to hold Moses responsible) is purely the Almighty’s decision, and not the result of anything that Moses has done.

**(16-18) And Moses said to Korah, “Tomorrow, you and all your company appear before the Lord, you and they and Aaron.” ... Each of them took his fire pan, put fire in it:** Into the fire pans they placed burning coals, upon which the incense would then be put.

**(18-19) Each of them... put fire in it ... and took his place at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, as did Moses and Aaron. Korah gathered the whole community against them at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting:** Thus, the uprising took place on a large scale, and Korah continued to lead the crowd, despite that, unlike his two hundred and fifty followers, he had no intention of offering his own incense.

**Then the Presence of the Lord appeared to the whole community:** Since the crowd has created a threat, and there is no force capable of stopping it, the Almighty must intervene directly.

## § 12.2. THE DEATH OF KORAH'S FOLLOWERS (16:20-35)

כּוּ וַיִּדְבֶּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: כֹּא הִבְדִּילוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַזֹּאת וְאָכְלָה אֹתָם כְּרִגְעָה: כִּבּוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵל אֱלֹהֵי הַרוּחַת לְכֹל־בָּשָׂר הָאִישׁ אַחַד יַחֲטֵא וְעַל כָּל־הָעֵדָה תִּקְצָף:

כג וַיִּדְבֶּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: כד דִּבֶּר אֶל־הָעֵדָה לֵאמֹר הֲעֵלוּ מִסְבִּיב לְמִשְׁכַּן־קֹרַח דָּתוֹ וְאַבִּירָם: כה וַיִּקַּם מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־דָּתוֹ וְאַבִּירָם וַיִּלְכוּ אַחֲרָיו זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: כו וַיִּדְבֶּר אֶל־הָעֵדָה לֵאמֹר סוּרוּ זֵא מֵעַל אֹהֲלֵי הָאֲנָשִׁים הַרְשָׁעִים הָאֵלֶּה וְאַל־תִּגְעוּ בְּכֹל־אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם פֶּן־תִּסְפּוּ בְּכֹל־חַטָּאתָם: כז וַיַּעֲלוּ מֵעַל מִשְׁכַּן־קֹרַח דָּתוֹ וְאַבִּירָם מִסְבִּיב וְדָתוֹ וְאַבִּירָם יֵצְאוּ נֹצְבִים פֶּתַח אֹהֲלֵיהֶם וּנְשֵׁיהֶם וּבְנֵיהֶם וְטַפָּם: כח וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה בְּזֹאת תִּדְעוּן כִּי־יִי שְׁלַחְנִי לַעֲשׂוֹת אֵת כָּל־הַמַּעֲשִׂים הָאֵלֶּה כִּי־לֹא מִלְּבָבִי: כט אִם־כִּמּוֹת כָּל־הָאָדָם יִמְתּוּן אֵלֶּה וּפְקַדַת כָּל־הָאָדָם יִפְקַד עֲלֵיהֶם לֹא יִי שְׁלַחְנִי: לוֹא־אִם־בְּרִיָּאָה יִבְרָא יִי וּפָצְתָה הָאָדָמָה אֶת־פִּיהָ וּבִלְעָה אֹתָם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם וַיִּרְדּוּ חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה וַיִּדְעֹתָם כִּי נֶאֱצְוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֶת־יְיָ: לא וַיְהִי כִכְלָתוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֵת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וּתְבַקַּע הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר תַּחְתֵּיהֶם: לב וּתִפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת־פִּיהָ וּתִבְלַע אֹתָם וְאֶת־בְּתֵיהֶם וְאֵת כָּל־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר לְקֹרַח וְאֵת

כָּל־הַרְכוּשׁ: לֵב וַיִּרְדּוּ הֵם וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה וְתַבָּס עֲלֵיהֶם  
הָאָרֶץ וַיֵּאבְדוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַקֶּהֱל: לֵד וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹתֵיהֶם נָסוּ  
לְקֹלָם כִּי אָמְרוּ פְּנִיתְבְּלַעְנוּ הָאָרֶץ: לֵה וְאֵשׁ יִצְאָה מֵאֵת יְיָ וְתֹאכַל אֶת  
הַחֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאֵתֵיךְ אִישׁ מִקְרִיבֵי הַקִּטְרֹת:

- (20) And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,  
(21) “Stand back from this community that I may annihilate them in an instant!”  
(22) But they fell on their faces and said, “O God, Source of the breath of all flesh! When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?”  
(23) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying,  
(24) “Speak to the community and say: Withdraw from about the abodes of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.”  
(25) Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, the elders of Israel following him.  
(26) He addressed the community, saying, “Move away from the tents of these wicked men and touch nothing that belongs to them, lest you be wiped out for all their sins.”  
(27) So they withdrew from about the abodes of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Now Dathan and Abiram had come out and they stood at the entrance of their tents, with their wives, their children, and their little ones.  
(28) And Moses said, “By this you shall know that it was the Lord who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising:  
(29) if these men die as all men do, if their lot be the common fate of all mankind, it was not the Lord who sent me.  
(30) But if the Lord brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have spurned the Lord.”  
(31) Scarcely had he finished speaking all these words when the ground under them burst asunder,  
(32) and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah’s people and all their possessions.

**(33) They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them; the earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation.**

**(34) All Israel around them fled at their shrieks, for they said, “The earth might swallow us!”**

**(35) And a fire went forth from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense.**

**(20) And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:** The Almighty now addresses Moses and Aaron together, since they are both involved in the conflict.

**(21) Stand back from this community that I may annihilate them in an instant!:** Because the people have succumbed to Korah’s persuasions, they too must bear the guilt and be punished for it. This is in line with the “justice approach,” corresponding to the attribute of Din, “judgement.” (See §§ 3.5, 8.7, and 9.7 above.)

**(22) But they fell on their faces and said, O God, Source of the breath of all flesh!:** That is: o God, Who understands human weakness and susceptibility to demagoguery.

**When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?:** Moses and Aaron want only Korah deemed guilty and held accountable, but the rest of the people to be treated with mercy, not justice. Thus Moses and Aaron demonstrate that they feel inextricably connected to the people, even as the whole community opposes them, and by virtue of this connection they save the people from destruction.

**(23-24) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the community and say:** Withdraw from about the abodes of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram”: Those who can distance themselves from the initiators of the rebellion, thus demonstrating that they have repented from their participation in a nefarious enterprise, will merit to be saved.

**(25) Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, the elders of Israel following him:** Now that Moses has begged for mercy for the people, the situation has changed: The nation’s leaders now side with Moses.

**(26) He addressed the community, saying, “Move away from the tents of these wicked men and touch nothing that belongs to them:** Moses adds yet more force to what the Almighty required. The people must not only move away from the tents of the perpetrators, but refrain as well from even touching their property.

**Lest you be wiped out for all their sins”:** That is, these are their sins, not yours. Moses considers the community not guilty, but merely misled. However, the result can be fatal nonetheless if they fail to distance themselves from the sinners and their sins.

**(27) So they withdrew from about the abodes of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram:** The people are moving away from Korah, both physically and socially. That is, they are distancing themselves from the rebellion.

**Now Dathan and Abiram had come out and they stood:** Literally, “came out standing.” The word “standing” seems superfluous, and is therefore understood by the commentators as indicating a stance of impudence and defiance. I.e., Dathan and Abiram continue to actively oppose Moses. Nothing, however, is said about Korah himself.

**At the entrance of their tents, with their wives, their children, and their little ones:** In the strict legal sense a criminal's family bears no responsibility for his actions. But in the court of history there is a different set of conventions. According to those norms, the perpetrators' families and even the entire nation must pay for the crimes of their leaders.

**(28) And Moses said, “By this you shall know that it was the Lord who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising:** Moses tries to show that he has followed the Almighty's instructions, and not acted arbitrarily. This is his primary refutation of Korah's accusations.

**(30) But if the Lord brings about something unheard-of:** Not merely something exceptional, but something by all accounts highly extraordinary that cannot be considered merely a “rare occurrence.” This will demonstrate unequivocally that the Almighty has intervened from Above.

**So that the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up ... you shall know that these men have spurned the Lord”:** Moses means: you will see that they were mounting a challenge not against Moses and Aaron (as they were themselves claiming), but against God Himself.

**(32-33) And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up ... the earth closed over them:** The unusual thing was not that the earth opened up, but that the edges of the chasm were then joined back together again without leaving a trace, as if nothing had happened. (This is why it is called “the mouth of the earth.”)

**And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households:** The demagoguery of Dathan, Abiram and “Korah’s people” is so completely negative, that absolutely nothing of them must be allowed to remain.

**All Korah’s people:** These are his followers who would not acknowledge their mistake and were prepared to continue the rebellion. Later in this book of Numbers we find a specific description of why and who exactly was (and was not) punished:

“The sons of Eliab were Nemuel, and Dathan and Abiram. These are the same Dathan and Abiram, chosen in the assembly, who agitated against Moses and Aaron as part of Korah’s band when they agitated against the Lord. Whereupon the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with Korah – when that band died, when the fire consumed the two hundred and fifty men – and they became an example. The sons of Korah, however, did not die.” (26:10-12)

**(34) All Israel around them fled at their shrieks, for they said, “The earth might swallow us!”:** All the people are terrified. Because they had initially supported the rebellion, they now fear that they too will be punished.

**(35) And a fire went forth from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense:** As degenerate demagogues, Dathan and Abiram were punished in a shameful and disgraceful manner: descent into oblivion. But conversely, the two hundred and

fifty received an exalted death, like that of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, before them, whose sin they had repeated.

§ 12.3. THE COPPER FIRE PANS ARE HAMMERED  
INTO PLATING FOR THE ALTAR (17:1-5)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב אָמַר אֶל־אַלְעָזָר בֶּן־אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וַיִּרֶם  
אֶת־הַמַּחֲתֹת מִבֵּין הַשְּׂרֵפָה וְאֶת־הָאֵשׁ זָרַה־הַלְּאָה כִּי קִדְּשׁוּ: ג אֵת  
מַחֲתֹת הַחֲטָאִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּנִפְשֹׁתָם וְעָשׂוּ אֹתָם רִקְעֵי פָחִים צָפוּי  
לְמִזְבֵּחַ כִּי־הַקְּרִיבִים לִפְנֵי־יְיָ וַיִּקְדָּשׁוּ וַיְהִיו לְאוֹת לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ד וַיִּקַּח  
אַלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן אֶת מַחֲתֹת הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר הִקְרִיבו הַשְּׂרֵפִים וַיִּרְקְעוּם  
צָפוּי לְמִזְבֵּחַ: ה וּזְכָרוֹן לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִקְרַב אִישׁ זָר  
אֲשֶׁר לֹא מִזֶּרַע אַהֲרֹן הוּא לְהִקְטִיר קֶטֶר לִפְנֵי יְיָ וְלֹא־יְהִי כְקִרְחַ  
וּכְעֹדָתוֹ כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְיָ בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה לֵּו:

- (1) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**
- (2) **Order Eleazar son of Aaron the priest to remove the fire pans – for they have become sacred – from among the charred remains; and scatter the coals abroad.**
- (3) **[Remove] the fire pans of those who have sinned at the cost of their lives, and let them be made into hammered sheets as plating for the altar – for once they have been used for offering to the Lord, they have become sacred – and let them serve as a warning to the people of Israel.**
- (4) **Eleazar the priest took the copper fire pans which had been used for offering by those who died in the fire; and they were hammered into plating for the altar,**
- (5) **as the Lord had ordered him through Moses. It was to be a reminder to the Israelites, so that no outsider – one not of Aaron's offspring – should presume to offer incense before the Lord and suffer the fate of Korah and his band.**

(2) **And scatter the coals abroad:** Literally, “and scatter the fire yonder.” The “fire” means the coals.

**And scatter the coals abroad:** “Scatter abroad” means to remove those coals as far away as possible.

For they have become sacred ... and scatter the coals abroad: The status of the coals has diminished, while the fire pans, on the contrary, have now acquired a higher status. The coals must therefore first be separated (“scattered abroad”) from the fire pans, which is the starting point for correcting the situation.

**(3) For once they have been used for offering to the Lord, they have become sacred:** The fire pans are deemed “sanctified objects,” which means that their everyday use is prohibited. They are now repurposed, and remain in the Temple. The fire pans were sanctified by having been used for the Temple service, but the coals, although they too participated in that service, have acquired no sanctity (and on the contrary, they must be discarded).

Thus, what matters here is not the technical details (that an object was used for holiness), but educating the people, by virtue of the symbolism of the fire pans and coals as representing the people who actually brought the incense offerings.

These people’s orientation cannot be considered purely negative; they have a positive idea, albeit incorrectly implemented. Unlike Dathan and Abiram, calculating villains who must be utterly destroyed along with their families and property, these two hundred and fifty men have brought about a negative result, but their aspirations overall are positive. They aspire, as it were, to fire pans, but by their actions they achieve only fire – coals. Their actions are unlawful and illegitimate (the coals must therefore be “scattered yonder”), but their aspirations deserve to be attached to the altar.

**And let them be made into hammered sheets as plating for the altar:** As the altar was already copper-plated, this plating made from the fire pans would only supplement that one and be subordinate to it.

**And let them serve as a warning to the people of Israel:** Since the second plating had no practical function, it served as only a sign, a reminder to the people that approaching holiness, even when done with

positive intentions, can lead to death if the proper restrictions are not observed.

**(5) A reminder to the Israelites, so that no outsider – one not of Aaron's offspring – should presume to offer incense:** This reminder reinforces in the minds of the people that in order to maintain and preserve the hierarchy, restrictions must be observed when one comes in contact with holiness.

#### § 12.4. AN INCENSE OFFERING STAYS A DEADLY PLAGUE

(17:6-15)

וַיִּלְנוּ כָּל־עַדְתַּת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּחְרַת עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר  
 אַתֶּם הַמֵּתִים אֶת־עַם יִי: וַיְהִי בְּהַקְהֵל הָעֵדָה עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן  
 וַיִּפְנוּ אֶל־אַהֲלֵ מוֹעֵד וְהִנֵּה כֶּסֶהוּ הָעֲנָן וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד יְיָ: ה וַיִּבֹא מֹשֶׁה  
 וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל־פְּנֵי אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד:

ט וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: י הֲרַמוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַזֹּאת וְאָכְלָה אֶתֶם  
 כְּרָגַע וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם: יא וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן קַח אֶת־הַמַּחְתָּה  
 וְתֹזַעְלֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְשִׁים קִטְרֹת וְהוֹלֵךְ מִהֵרָה אֶל־הָעֵדָה  
 וְכִפֶּר עֲלֵיהֶם כִּי־יֵצֵא הַקֶּצֶף מִלִּפְנֵי יְיָ הַחַל הַנִּגָּף: יב וַיִּקַּח אַהֲרֹן  
 כַּאֲשֶׁר | דִּבְרַר מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּרָץ אֶל־תּוֹךְ הַקְּהָל וְהִנֵּה הַחַל הַנִּגָּף בָּעַם וַיִּתֵּן  
 אֶת־הַקִּטְרֹת וַיְכַפֵּר עַל־הָעַם: יג וַיַּעֲמֵד בֵּין־הַמֵּתִים וּבֵין הַחַיִּים וַתַּעֲצֹר  
 הַמַּגֵּפָה: יד וַיְהִיו הַמֵּתִים בַּמַּגֵּפָה אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר אֶלֶף וּשְׁבַע מֵאוֹת  
 מִלִּבְדַּת הַמֵּתִים עַל־דְּבַר־קִרְחָ: טו וַיָּשָׁב אַהֲרֹן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל  
 מוֹעֵד וְהַמַּגֵּפָה נִעְצְרָה:

(6) Next day the whole Israelite community railed against Moses and Aaron, saying, “You two have brought death upon the Lord’s people!”

(7) But as the community gathered against them, Moses and Aaron turned toward the Tent of Meeting; the cloud had covered it and the Presence of the Lord appeared.

(8) When Moses and Aaron reached the Tent of Meeting,

(9) the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,

(10) **“Remove yourselves from this community, that I may annihilate them in an instant.” They fell on their faces.**

(11) **Then Moses said to Aaron, “Take the fire pan, and put on it fire from the altar. Add incense and take it quickly to the community and make expiation for them. For wrath has gone forth from the Lord: the plague has begun!”**

(12) **Aaron took it, as Moses had ordered, and ran to the midst of the congregation, where the plague had begun among the people. He put on the incense and made expiation for the people;**

(13) **he stood between the dead and the living until the plague was checked.**

(14) **Those who died of the plague came to fourteen thousand and seven hundred, aside from those who died on account of Korah.**

(15) **Aaron then returned to Moses at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, since the plague was checked.**

**(6) Next day the whole Israelite community railed against Moses and Aaron:** The perpetrators have been punished, but the rebellion is hardly over. This is an indication of a much deeper problem within the society as whole. It would be wrong to say that the rebellion was all due to Korah, who simply seduced the people.

**Saying, “You two have brought death upon the Lord’s people!”:** Dathan and Abiram’s death raises no questions in the minds of the people, for it was clearly the Almighty’s decision.

But despite the fact that the Almighty has commanded that the altar be plated with the fire pans of the two hundred and fifty men, thus emphasizing their positive aspect, the people still see their death as a ruse on Moses and Aaron’s part. And the rebellion therefore continues on.

**You two have brought death upon the Lord’s people!:** According to the straightforward meaning, “the Lord’s people” are the two hundred and fifty men. But it could also mean all the people of Israel who objected to the replacement of the firstborns with the Levites, because they saw that as alienating the people from the service of God, which to them is a form of death.

The consolidation of the people is not achieved by administrative appointments alone (not even Divine ones), but only through a long process of integration. The Almighty therefore demonstrates to the people several times, and in various aspects, the chosenness of the Levites and the *kohanim*, and then connects all the tribes to them through tithing and Temple offerings (as elaborated in great detail in the next chapter). Those will require the Levites to be scattered among the tribes, and to be dependent on them, thus preserving the connection with holiness for the entire nation.

**(7) But as the community gathered against them, Moses and Aaron turned toward the Tent of Meeting;** the cloud had covered it and the Presence of the Lord appeared: The Almighty must now again intervene directly. This shows the depth of the problem that is affecting the people, and the need for a rigid hierarchy that will enable them to continue on the proper path.

**(9-10) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Remove yourselves from this community, that I may annihilate them in an instant”:** Here Moses can no longer blame anyone in particular, because it is so clear that the fault lies with the entire nation. This is a new test for Moses – a test of whether he will be able to successfully defend the people even in the face of their obvious and pervasive guilt.

**They fell on their faces:** Moses is silent, because he has no more arguments to mount for the defense. The only thing left for him to do now is to remain with the community as a show of solidarity with them, and as a plea for mercy on their behalf.

**(11) Then Moses said to Aaron, “Take the fire pan ... For wrath has gone forth from the Lord: the plague has begun!”:** Unlike similar earlier instances, Moses is unable to formulate arguments in defense of the Jewish people. God therefore proceeds forthwith to exact the punishment, and the plague begins. Finding himself in such a situation, Moses resolves to act on his own, and gives orders for an incense offering to be brought not in the Tabernacle as it always is, but in the camp, i.e., in the midst of the community,

**(11) Put on it fire from the altar. Add incense and take it quickly to the community:** Only a short time earlier an incense offering had

killed two hundred and fifty men, provoking the indignation of the people, who saw Aaron as a dangerous man who caused others to die. Therefore, it was now important to show the people Aaron's positive side, and also for them to see that incense is not something dangerous, but, on the contrary, it protects and saves lives.

**And make expiation for them:** Stay the hand of death with the help of incense.

**(12) Aaron took it, as Moses had ordered, and ran to the midst of the congregation:** Aaron runs to save the lives of the very people who wanted to see him dead. Thus he demonstrates exceptional nobility of character, and for this alone he deserves to be the High Priest.

**Where the plague had begun among the people:** More literally, "And, behold, the plague had begun among the people."

**Although we have already been told that "wrath has gone forth from the Lord:** the plague has begun!" (Num. 17:11), it is repeated here to stress that this was an unusually virulent and fast-spreading plague. Had Aaron not hurried, the nation could easily have perished.

**(13) He stood between the dead and the living until the plague was checked:** When the people saw that Aaron had saved them and that they owed him their lives, their discontent was overcome, and the foundations of a national reeducation were also laid.

**(14) Those who died of the plague came to fourteen thousand and seven hundred, aside from those who died on account of Korah:** In this case, the blame lies not only with a few troublemakers, but with the entire nation, and the consequences are therefore much more serious.

To explain the protective power of the incense offerings, the Midrash says that they symbolize the unity of society. According to Tradition, the incense that was offered twice daily in the Temple was an admixture of eleven aromatic spices, all but one of which are sweet-smelling; only galbanum has a putrid odor. However, when the entire incense mixture is burned as a unit, the galbanum does not impact the overall odor negatively, but, on the contrary, it makes an essential contribution, without which the aroma of the incense would be incomplete and incorrect.

Likewise, impious individuals can be constructively incorporated into the larger society, and their negative attributes can then be redirected, and put to constructive use.

Like the incense without its galbanum, the Jewish nation is considered incomplete without its sinners. “Rabbi Shimon Hasida says: Any fast that does not include the participation of some of the sinners of the Jewish people is not a fast, as the smell of galbanum is foul and yet the verse lists it with the ingredients of the incense” (Talmud, Keritot 6b).

The incense thus represents a request to the Almighty to forgive the people even if there are bad people among them. And even when the entire nation behaves badly.

**(15) Aaron then returned to Moses at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, since the plague was checked:** Aaron acknowledges that in his leadership role he is not an independent leader, but only an assistant to his brother Moses, whose instructions he implements. Therefore, at the conclusion of Aaron’s mission he does not break away from Moses, but returns to him. Aaron owes his success as a leader to his having adopted this attitude and position.

#### § 12.5. AARON’S STAFF (17:16-26)

יז וַיִּדְבֹר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: יח דַּבֵּר | אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְקַח מֵאֹתָם  
מִטָּה מִטָּה לְבֵית אָב מֵאֵת כָּל־נְשִׂיאֵהֶם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר  
מִטּוֹת אִישׁ אֶת־שִׁמּוֹ תִּכְתֹּב עַל־מִטָּהוּ: יח וְאֵת שֵׁם אֹהֶרֶן תִּכְתֹּב עַל־  
מִטָּה לְוִי כִי מִטָּה אֶחָד לְרֹאשׁ בֵּית אֲבוֹתָם: יט וְהִנַּחְתָּם בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד  
לְפָנֵי הָעֵדוּת אֲשֶׁר אוֹעֵד לָכֶם שָׁמָּה: כ וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אֲבַחֲרֶבּוּ  
מִטָּהוּ יִפְרָח וְהִשְׁכַּחְתִּי מֵעַלִי אֶת־תְּלִנּוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵם מְלִינִם  
עֲלֵיכֶם: כא וַיִּדְבֹר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּתְּנוּ אֵלָיו | כָּל־נְשִׂיאֵיהֶם  
מִטָּה לְנָשִׂיא אֶחָד מִטָּה לְנָשִׂיא אֶחָד לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר מִטּוֹת  
וּמִטָּה אֹהֶרֶן בְּתוֹךְ מִטּוֹתָם: כב וַיִּנַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמַּטָּה לְפָנָיו יְיָ בְּאֹהֶל  
הָעֵדוּת: כג וַיְהִי מִמְּחֹרָת וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אֹהֶל הָעֵדוּת וְהִנֵּה פָּרַח מִטָּה־  
אֹהֶרֶן לְבֵית לְוִי וַיֵּצֵא פָּרַח וַיֵּצֵץ צִיץ וַיִּגְמַל שְׁקֵדִים: כד וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה  
אֶת־כָּל־הַמַּטָּה מִלְּפָנָיו יְיָ אֶל־כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּרְאוּ וַיִּקְחוּ אִישׁ מִטָּהוּ:

כֹּה וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הִשָּׁב אֶת־מִטֵּה אֶהְרֹן לְפָנַי הָעֵדוּת לְמִשְׁמֶרֶת  
 לְאֹזֶת לְבְנֵי־מִרְי וְתִכְלֹל תְּלוּנְתָם מֵעַלְי וְלֹא יִמְתּוּ: כֹּה וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה כַּאֲשֶׁר  
 צִוָּה יְיָ אֱתוֹ כֵּן עָשָׂה:

(16) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

(17) **Speak to the Israelite people and take from them – from the chieftains of their ancestral houses – one staff for each chieftain of an ancestral house: twelve staffs in all. Inscribe each man’s name on his staff,**

(18) **there being one staff for each head of an ancestral house; also inscribe Aaron’s name on the staff of Levi.**

(19) **Deposit them in the Tent of Meeting before the Pact, where I meet with you.**

(20) **The staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout, and I will rid Myself of the incessant mutterings of the Israelites against you.**

(21) **Moses spoke thus to the Israelites. Their chieftains gave him a staff for each chieftain of an ancestral house, twelve staffs in all; among these staffs was that of Aaron.**

(22) **Moses deposited the staffs before the Lord, in the Tent of the Pact.**

(23) **The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Pact, and there the staff of Aaron of the house of Levi had sprouted: it had brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms, and borne almonds.**

(24) **Moses then brought out all the staffs from before the Lord to all the Israelites; each identified and recovered his staff.**

(25) **The Lord said to Moses, “Put Aaron’s staff back before the Pact, to be kept as a lesson to rebels, so that their mutterings against Me may cease, lest they die.”**

(26) **This Moses did; just as the Lord had commanded him, so he did.**

(17) **Speak to the Israelite people and take from them – from the chieftains of their ancestral houses:** All previous justifications for Aaron’s chosenness were based on “negative foundations” – the death of his challengers and his having stayed the hand of death from pestilence.

But these were not enough. A “positive justification” is needed as well, and the blossoming staff will now serve that purpose.

**(18) There being one staff for each head of an ancestral house;** also inscribe Aaron's name on the staff of Levi: This episode of the staff provides two justifications – for Levi having been chosen over the other tribes, and for Aaron's primacy as the leader of the tribe of Levi.

**(19) Deposit them in the Tent of Meeting before the Pact:** In Hebrew, *ha-edut*, “the Testimony,” which is short for the more usual *luchot ha-‘edut*, “the Tablets of the Testimony.” That is, the staffs are to be deposited before the Ark that contains the two tablets, which testify to the Covenant that the Almighty has forged with Israel.

**Where I meet with you:** The testimony concerning the chosenness of Aaron and his descendants is a manifestation of Divine revelation.

**(20) The staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout, and I will rid Myself of the incessant mutterings of the Israelites against you:** Aaron's chosenness is symbolized by the flowering of his staff, rather than any another sign, in order to show the people that their proper connection to the Almighty that happens through Aaron and the Levites will lead to prosperity. Only such positive testimony can quell the murmurings of the children of Israel.

**(23) The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Pact, and there the staff of Aaron of the house of Levi had sprouted:** it had brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms, and borne almonds: It might have been enough to inform us in general terms that Aaron's staff had blossomed. But the Torah's description is much more elaborate, a process involving sprouts, blossoms, and fruits. The Midrash therefore explains, that inside the Tabernacle the staff merely sprouted, but when Moses brought it out for all to see, the staff blossomed, and almonds then ripened upon it as well.

**(24) Moses then brought out all the staffs from before the Lord to all the Israelites;** each identified and recovered his staff: They were convinced precisely because they had themselves witnessed the ripening of the almonds.

Each identified and recovered his staff: That is, each acknowledged his place in the hierarchy, and gave his assent that within the Tabernacle only Aaron's staff could be truly and completely viable.

**(25) The Lord said to Moses, “Put Aaron's staff back before the Pact, to be kept as a lesson to rebels”:** The Jews have always been – and to this day remain – an obstinate people who insist on questioning everything. This is simultaneously both a significant shortcoming and an enormously positive and beneficial quality.

## § 13. REINFORCING THE STRUCTURE OF THE SPIRITUAL HIERARCHY

### § 13.1. ESTABLISHING THE PRIESTLY AND LEVITICAL HIERARCHIES (17:27-18:7)

כז וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֹא־מָר הָיוּ גִּעְוֵנו אֲבָדְנוּ כָּלֵנוּ אֲבָדְנוּ: כח כָּל הַקָּרֵב | הַקָּרֵב אֶל־מִשְׁכַּן יְיָ יָמוּת הָאִם תָּמְנוּ לַגֹּעַ:

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֶל־אַהֲרֹן אַתָּה וּבְנֵיךָ וּבֵית־אָבִיךָ אַתָּה תִּשָּׂאוּ אֶת־עֹזֶן הַמִּקְדָּשׁ וְאַתָּה וּבְנֵיךָ אַתָּה תִּשָּׂאוּ אֶת־עֹזֶן כְּהִנְתְּכֶם: ב וְגַם אֶת־אַחֶיךָ מִטָּה לְזֵי שִׁבְט אָבִיךָ הַקָּרֵב אַתָּה וְיָלוּ עֲלֶיךָ וְיִשְׂרְתוּךָ וְאַתָּה וּבְנֵיךָ אַתָּה לִפְנֵי אֱהֵל הָעֵדוּת: ג וְשָׂמְרוּ מִשְׁמֶרֶתְךָ וּמִשְׁמֶרֶת כָּל־הָאֱהֵל אִךְ אֶל־כְּלֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֶל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא יִקְרְבוּ וְלֹא־יָמְתוּ גַם־הֵם גַּם־אַתֶּם: ד וְנָלוּ עֲלֶיךָ וְשָׂמְרוּ אֶת־מִשְׁמֶרֶת אֱהֵל מוֹעֵד לְכָל עֲבֹדַת הָאֱהֵל וְזָר לֹא־יִקְרַב אֲלֵיכֶם: ה וּשְׁמֶרְתֶּם אֶת מִשְׁמֶרֶת הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֶת מִשְׁמֶרֶת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה עוֹד קֶצֶף עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ו וְאֲנִי הִנֵּה לֹקַחְתִּי אֶת־אַחֵיכֶם הַלְוִיִּם מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְכֹהֵן מִתְּנֶה נְתָנִים לִי לְעֹבֵד אֶת־עֲבֹדַת אֱהֵל מוֹעֵד: ז וְאַתָּה וּבְנֵיךָ אַתָּה תִּשָּׂאוּ אֶת־כְּהִנְתְּכֶם לְכָל־דָּבָר הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְלַמִּבְיָת לְפָרֶכֶת וְעַבְדְּתֶם עֲבֹדַת מִתְּנָה אֶתְּו אֶת־כְּהִנְתְּכֶם וְהָזָר הַקָּרֵב יוּמָת:

(27) But the Israelites said to Moses, "Lo, we perish! We are lost, all of us lost!

(28) Everyone who so much as ventures near the Lord's Tabernacle must die. Alas, we are doomed to perish!"

- (1) **The Lord said to Aaron: You and your sons and the ancestral house under your charge shall bear any guilt connected with the sanctuary; you and your sons alone shall bear any guilt connected with your priesthood.**
- (2) **You shall also associate with yourself your kinsmen the tribe of Levi, your ancestral tribe, to be attached to you and to minister to you, while you and your sons under your charge are before the Tent of the Pact.**
- (3) **They shall discharge their duties to you and to the Tent as a whole, but they must not have any contact with the furnishings of the Shrine or with the altar, lest both they and you die.**
- (4) **They shall be attached to you and discharge the duties of the Tent of Meeting, all the service of the Tent; but no outsider shall intrude upon you**
- (5) **as you discharge the duties connected with the Shrine and the altar, that wrath may not again strike the Israelites.**
- (6) **I hereby take your fellow Levites from among the Israelites; they are assigned to you in dedication to the Lord, to do the work of the Tent of Meeting;**
- (7) **while you and your sons shall be careful to perform your priestly duties in everything pertaining to the altar and to what is behind the curtain. I make your priesthood a service of dedication; any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death.**

(27-28) **But the Israelites said to Moses, "... Everyone who so much as ventures near the Lord's Tabernacle must die":** They are leveling an accusation at Moses: "You have created a center of such exalted sanctity among the people of Israel that we are now all in grave danger."

**But the Israelites said to Moses, "Lo, we perish! We are lost, all of us lost! Everyone who so much as ventures near the Lord's Tabernacle must die. Alas, we are doomed to perish!":** On a first reading these words are incomprehensible. Even if "everyone who so much as ventures near the Lord's Tabernacle must die," this hardly means that the people are doomed. They can easily avoid death simply by not approaching the Sanctuary!

Rather, the meaning is as follows. “Since we are forbidden to approach the Sanctuary, we have completely lost our connection with holiness. Thus we are doomed to death, because without contact with holiness, death is inevitable and we will all perish.”

This understanding of the people’s words agrees with the overall context. The main idea of Korah’s rebellion was false messianism: striving for holiness in the absence of the ability to adhere to the prescribed framework. And this also explains the Almighty’s response to these words in the very next chapter. He immediately establishes between the Levites and all the other tribes a system of interaction through tithing. Moreover, the Levites are evenly distributed among all the tribes, thus making it possible for all of Israel to maintain their constant connection with holiness even without entering into the Temple.

**(1) The Lord said to Aaron: You and your sons:** I.e., the *kohanim*, “the priests.”

**And the ancestral house under your charge:** That is, the *kohanim* together with the Kohathites. Here they receive the commandment of *shemirat ha-mikdash*, “guarding the Temple.”

**Shall bear any guilt connected with the sanctuary:** An ordinary Jew who enters the Sanctuary will be held accountable for that transgression, but so will the *kohanim* and the Kohathites, because they have failed to fulfill the commandment that they are charged with upholding.

**You and your sons alone shall bear any guilt connected with your priesthood:** This is no longer about the mere entry of an outsider into the territory of the Temple, but about a stranger who undertakes to perform the priestly Temple service. In the event of such a violation, the *kohanim* themselves are held responsible for it. Thus, the hierarchy is enforced and reinforced through multiple explicit prohibitions against violating it.

**(2) You shall also associate with yourself your kinsmen the tribe of Levi, your ancestral tribe, to be attached to you and to minister to you, while you and your sons under your charge are before the Tent of the Pact:** Because the Levites have distanced themselves from Aaron by participating in Korah’s rebellion against

him, they must now be brought closer again. But nonetheless, even when the Levites are brought near, the hierarchy must not be violated. It is therefore emphasized here that only the *kohanim* may serve inside the Tabernacle.

**(3) They shall discharge their duties to you and to the Tent as a whole, but they must not have any contact with the furnishings of the Shrine or with the altar, lest both they and you die:** The *kohanim* are responsible for ensuring that the Levites will not exceed the boundaries of what is permitted. This three-tier hierarchy of *kohanim*, Levites, and the rest of the people is needed in order to preserve the “difference of potentials” within Jewish society, thereby providing maximal opportunities to all for spiritual growth.

#### § 13.2. EATING WITHIN THE TEMPLE AS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF THE TEMPLE SERVICE (18:8-19)

ח וַיִּדְבַר יי אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וַאֲנִי הִנֵּה נֹתְתִי לָךְ אֶת־מִשְׁמַרְתִּי תְרוֹמַתִּי לְכָל־  
 קֹדֶשִׁי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לָךְ נֹתְתִים לְמִשְׁחָה וּלְבִנְיָהּ לְחֶקֶעוֹלָם: ט וְהִיא־  
 יְהִיָּה לָךְ מִקֹּדֶשׁ הַקֹּדָשִׁים מִן־הָאֵשׁ כָּל־קָרְבָּנִים לְכָל־מִנְחָתָם  
 וּלְכָל־חֻטְאֵתָם וּלְכָל־אֲשָׁמָם אֲשֶׁר יֵשִׁיבוּ לִי קֹדֶשׁ קֹדָשִׁים לָךְ הוּא  
 וּלְבִנְיָהּ: י בְּקֹדֶשׁ הַקֹּדָשִׁים תֹּאכְלֶנּוּ כָּל־זֶכֶר יֹאכֵל אִתּוֹ קֹדֶשׁ יְהִיָּה־  
 לָךְ: יא וְהִיא־לָךְ תְרוֹמַת מִתְּנֻם לְכָל־תְּנוּפֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָךְ נֹתְתִים  
 וּלְבִנְיָהּ וּלְבִנְיָהּ אֵתָךְ לְחֶקֶעוֹלָם כָּל־טְהוֹר בְּבֵיתָךְ יֹאכֵל אִתּוֹ: יב בַּל־  
 חֶלֶב יִצְהָר וְכָל־חֶלֶב תִּירוֹשׁ וְדָגָן רֵאשִׁיתָם אֲשֶׁר־יִתְּנוּ לִי לָךְ  
 נֹתְתִים: יג בְּכוֹרֵי כָל־אֲשֶׁר בְּאַרְצָם אֲשֶׁר־יִבְיֵאוּ לִי לָךְ יְהִיָּה כָּל־טְהוֹר  
 בְּבֵיתָךְ יֹאכְלֶנּוּ: יד כָּל־חֶרֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל לָךְ יְהִיָּה: טו כָּל־פֶּטֶר רְחֵם לְכָל־  
 בָּשָׂר אֲשֶׁר־קָרִיבוּ לִי בָּאֲדָם וּבְבַהֲמָה יְהִיָּה־לָךְ אֵךְ | פְּדָה תִּפְדֶּה  
 אֵת בְּכוֹר הָאֲדָם וְאֵת בְּכוֹר־הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּמֵאָה תִּפְדֶּה: טז וּפְדוּיוֹ מִבְּזֶז־  
 תִּדֶשׁ תִּפְדֶּה בְּעֶרְכָּךְ כֶּסֶף חֲמִשָּׁת שְׁקָלִים בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֶשְׂרִים גֶּרָה  
 הוּא: יז אֵךְ בְּכוֹר־שׁוֹר אִו־בְּכוֹר כָּשֵׁב אִו־בְּכוֹר עֵז לֹא תִּפְדֶּה קֹדֶשׁ  
 הֵם אֵת־דָּמָם תִּזְרַק עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְאֵת־חֲלֶבֶם תִּקְטִיר אֵשָׁה לְרִיחַ נִיחַח  
 לִי: יח וּבָשָׂרָם יְהִיָּה־לָךְ כַּחַזָּה הַתְּנוּפָה וּכְשׂוֹק הִימִין לָךְ יְהִיָּה: יט כָּל |

תְּרוּמַת הַקֹּדְשִׁים אֲשֶׁר יָרִימוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לִי נְתַתִּי לָךְ וּלְבָנֶיךָ  
 וּלְבָנֹתֶיךָ אִתְּךָ לְחֶק־עוֹלָם בְּרִית מְלַח עוֹלָם הוּא לְפָנַי יי לָךְ וּלְיִרְעָךָ  
 אִתְּךָ:

(8) **The Lord spoke further to Aaron: I hereby give you charge of My gifts, all the sacred donations of the Israelites; I grant them to you and to your sons as a perquisite, a due for all time.**

(9) **This shall be yours from the most holy sacrifices, the offerings by fire: every such offering that they render to Me as most holy sacrifices, namely, every meal offering, sin offering, and guilt offering of theirs, shall belong to you and your sons.**

(10) **You shall partake of them as most sacred donations: only males may eat them; you shall treat them as consecrated.**

(11) **This, too, shall be yours: the gift offerings of their contributions, all the elevation offerings of the Israelites, I give to you, to your sons, and to the daughters that are with you, as a due for all time; everyone of your household who is clean may eat it.**

(12) **All the best of the new oil, wine, and grain – the choice parts that they present to the Lord – I give to you.**

(13) **The first fruits of everything in their land, that they bring to the Lord, shall be yours; everyone of your household who is clean may eat them.**

(14) **Everything that has been proscribed in Israel shall be yours.**

(15) **The first issue of the womb of every being, man or beast, that is offered to the Lord, shall be yours; but you shall have the first-born of man redeemed, and you shall also have the firstling of unclean animals redeemed.**

(16) **Take as their redemption price, from the age of one month up, the money equivalent of five shekels by the sanctuary weight, which is twenty gerahs.**

(17) **But the firstlings of cattle, sheep, or goats may not be redeemed; they are consecrated. You shall dash their blood against the altar, and turn their fat into smoke as an offering by fire for a pleasing odor to the Lord.**

**(18) But their meat shall be yours: it shall be yours like the breast of elevation offering and like the right thigh.**

**(19) All the sacred gifts that the Israelites set aside for the Lord I give to you, to your sons, and to the daughters that are with you, as a due for all time. It shall be an everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord for you and for your offspring as well.**

One of the most important elements of the Temple service performed by the *kohanim* was that they ate the sacrifices, which consisted mainly of meat and bread.

Temple food is ideal food. In the ordinary world outside the Temple people eat because they are hungry, and because they will die unless they eat. But the fundamental purpose of food is not those. Rather than merely sustaining and maintaining our survival, food allows us to absorb the world around us, to incorporate the surrounding world into ourselves, as it were.

Which of the two approaches is morally more correct: “I eat to live,” or “I live to eat”? The Torah supports the second of those two. We come to this world to “eat” it – to consume it, to absorb it into ourselves. Food is not just a part of life. Food is life itself.

Physical food is also symbolic of our relationship to the world, of an attitude of wanting to incorporate the entire universe into ourselves. The Torah says about the Garden of Eden: “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die’ ” (Gen. 2:16-17). The literal translation, however, is different. Not “Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat,” but “Of every tree of the garden you shall surely eat.” That is, you must eat.

Only one tree in the Garden was forbidden to Adam and Eve, while of all other trees they were not only allowed to partake, but were commanded to do so. Such is the proper path of human life. We come into the world to “eat” it: we do not eat to live, we live to eat. It is my duty to consume the entire Creation, to make the entire Creation a part of myself, to raise it to my own level – the level of man as the image of God.

When we speak of “food” in this context, of course we mean not only food in the literal sense. This “food” is quite diverse, for it takes many forms. The way we “consume” science, art, or sports is different from how we eat bread, but the essence of all food is the same, and physical food is only a symbolic representation of spiritual food.

The food eaten by the *kohanim* in the Temple was that kind of ideal food, in that it represented human life as the process of incorporating all of the Creation into oneself. The Temple food was an ideal food eaten in an ideal place by ideal people. In a certain sense, it served to correct the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, who transgressed God’s only commandment to them – the prohibition of eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The development of a human embryo is a metaphor for transforming the universe by consuming our surroundings. The boundaries of an embryo’s world are the walls of his mother’s womb. When the embryo first begins to grow inside that womb, the distance between him and the wall of the womb is very substantial – an abyss, as it were. But he eats and eats, and as he eats he grows. The distance between him and the wall of the womb gradually decreases, until he comes to a certain stage of development where there is no gap at all between himself and the world around him.

He fills the entire space of his world. He is the world. But then comes his time to be born, to leave his inner world and enter the larger world. Now his world has entirely new boundaries. He sees heaven. He begins to “eat” everything that can be eaten – he learns about the world in all its aspects. And after eating the entire world, his next “birth” becomes possible: he reaches the World to Come, in which the next stage of development awaits him. Except that that world is beyond the realm of our knowledge.

**(8) The Lord spoke further to Aaron: I hereby give you charge of My gifts:** A system of gifts is established that binds the *kohanim* and the Levites with the rest of the nation, thus facilitating appropriate and proper interactions across all three levels of Jewish society.

**(9-10) This shall be yours from the most holy sacrifices ... every such offering ... You shall partake of them as most sacred donations: only males may eat them:** The Temple sacrifices may be

eaten only by the kohanim themselves inside the Temple. They are to treat the eating of the sacrifices as an element of the Temple service that symbolizes “consuming the universe” on a microscale.

**(11) This, too, shall be yours:** the gift offerings of ... all the elevation offerings of the Israelites, I give to you, to your sons, and to the daughters that are with you, as a due for all time: Unlike sacrifices, the “gift offerings of produce,” *terumah*, that the *kohanim* receive may be eaten by the *kohanim* themselves and also by their family members.

**Everyone of your household who is clean may eat it:** However, they may eat such gift offerings only when in a state of *tohorah*, “ritual purity.”

**(14) Everything that has been proscribed in Israel shall be yours:** The Hebrew here for “proscribed” is *cherem*. These are items – animals or inanimate objects – that have been presented to the Temple in fulfillment of an oath. As such, they cannot be redeemed.

**(19) It shall be an everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord for you and for your offspring as well:** Salt represents everlastingness because it never changes nor deteriorates and, moreover, even preserves other foodstuffs, keeping them safe for consumption. The transfer of a portion of the harvest and the offspring of livestock to the *kohen* serves as “salt,” by contributing to the preservation of agricultural activities.

### § 13.3. THE PORTION OF THE PRIESTS AMONG THE ISRAELITES (18:20-32)

כ וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֶל־אַהֲרֹן בְּאַרְצָם לֹא תִנְחַל וְחֵלֶק לֹא־יְהִיָּה לָךְ בְּתוֹכָם  
אֲנִי חֵלְקֶךָ וְנִחַלְתָּךְ בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

כא וּלְבָנָי לְוִי הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי כָל־מַעֲשֵׂר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל לְנַחֲלָה חֶלְף עֲבַדְתֶּם  
אֲשֶׁר־הֵם עֲבָדִים אֶת־עַבְדְּת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: כב וְלֹא־יִקְרְבוּ עוֹד בְּנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לְשֵׂאת חֲטָא לְמוֹת: כג וְעַבְד הַלְוִי הוּא אֶת־  
עַבְדְּת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהֵם יִשְׂאוּ עוֹנֵם חֶקֶת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם וּבְתוֹךְ בְּנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִנְחָלוּ נַחֲלָה: כד כִּי אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂר בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָרִימוּ  
לְיַי תְּרוֹמָה נָתַתִּי לְלוֹיִם לְנַחֲלָה עַל־כֵּן אֲמַרְתִּי לָהֶם בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
לֹא יִנְחָלוּ נַחֲלָה:

כה וידבר יי אל־משה לאמר: כו ואל־הלויים תדבר ואמרת אליהם  
 כִּי־תִקְחוּ מֵאֵת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַמַּעֲשֹׂר אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָכֶם מֵאֵתְכֶם  
 בְּנַחֲלֹתְכֶם וְהִרְמַתֶם מִמֶּנּוּ תְרוּמָת יי מַעֲשֹׂר מִן־הַמַּעֲשֹׂר: כז וַנְּחַשֵׁב  
 לָכֶם תְּרוּמַתְכֶם כַּדָּגוּן מִן־הַגֶּרֶן וְכַמְלֵאָה מִן־הַיֶּקֶב: כח כֵּן תְּרִימוּ גַם־  
 אִתְּכֶם תְּרוּמָת יי מִכֹּל מַעֲשֵׂי־תִיְכֶם אֲשֶׁר תִּקְחוּ מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
 וְנָתַתֶּם מִמֶּנּוּ אֶת־תְּרוּמָת יי לְאַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן: כט מִכֹּל מִתְּנִיְכֶם תְּרִימוּ  
 אֵת כָּל־תְּרוּמָת יי מִכָּל־חֲלִבּוֹ אֶת־מִקְדָּשׁוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ: לוֹ וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם  
 בְּהִרְיַמְכֶם אֶת־חֲלִבּוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ וְנַחֲשֵׁב לְלוּיִם כַּתְּבוּאָת גֶּרֶן וְכַתְּבוּאָת  
 יֶקֶב: לא וְאִכַּלְתֶּם אֹתוֹ בְּכָל־מְקוֹם אֲתֶם וּבֵיתְכֶם כִּי־שָׁכַר הוּא לָכֶם  
 חֶלֶף עֲבַדְתֶּם בְּאַהֲל מוֹעֵד: לב וְלֹא־תִשְׂאוּ עָלֶיךָ חֶטָּא בְּהִרְיַמְכֶם אֶת־  
 חֲלִבּוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ וְאֶת־קֹדְשֵׁי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא תַחֲלִלוּ וְלֹא תָמוּתוּ:

(20) And the Lord said to Aaron: You shall, however, have no territorial share among them or own any portion in their midst; I am your portion and your share among the Israelites.

(21) And to the Levites I hereby give all the tithes in Israel as their share in return for the services that they perform, the services of the Tent of Meeting.

(22) Henceforth, Israelites shall not trespass on the Tent of Meeting, and thus incur guilt and die:

(23) only Levites shall perform the services of the Tent of Meeting; others would incur guilt. It is the law for all time throughout the ages. But they shall have no territorial share among the Israelites;

(24) for it is the tithes set aside by the Israelites as a gift to the Lord that I give to the Levites as their share. Therefore I have said concerning them: They shall have no territorial share among the Israelites.

(25) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

(26) Speak to the Levites and say to them: When you receive from the Israelites their tithes, which I have assigned to you as your share, you shall set aside from them one-tenth of the tithe as a gift to the Lord.

(27) This shall be accounted to you as your gift. As with the new grain from the threshing floor or the flow from the vat,

(28) **so shall you on your part set aside a gift for the Lord from all the tithes that you receive from the Israelites; and from them you shall bring the gift for the Lord to Aaron the priest.**

(29) **You shall set aside all gifts due to the Lord from everything that is donated to you, from each thing its best portion, the part thereof that is to be consecrated.**

(30) **Say to them further: When you have removed the best part from it, you Levites may consider it the same as the yield of threshing floor or vat.**

(31) **You and your households may eat it anywhere, for it is your recompense for your services in the Tent of Meeting.**

(32) **You will incur no guilt through it, once you have removed the best part from it; but you must not profane the sacred donations of the Israelites, lest you die.**

Creating and maintaining a proper connection with holiness depends on a strict hierarchy, which becomes fixed by virtue of these offerings. When the Israelites present offerings to the Levites, the latter make their own offerings to the kohanim, the priests, from what they have received. Thus, the hierarchy is reinforced.

However, the Israelites too must give other offerings directly to the *kohanim*. Thus, they have also their own direct connection to the kohanim, and not only through the Levites.

**(20) And the Lord said to Aaron: You shall, however, have no territorial share among them or own any portion in their midst:** The Levite cities – forty-eight cities scattered throughout the territories of all the tribes (see Num. 35:7) – do not properly belong to the Levites. Those cities are a part of the inheritance of the other tribes.

**I am your portion and your share among the Israelites:** Even their food does not belong to them. They eat it only as the Almighty's representatives: "The priests receive their portion from the table of the Almighty" (Talmud, Menachot 6a).

**(21) And to the Levites I hereby give all the tithes in Israel as their share in return for the services that they perform, the services of the Tent of Meeting:** The *kohanim* and the Levites depend for their food on the intensity of religious fervor that they are able to inspire among the people. In order to be assured of receiving offerings

and tithes, the *kohanim* and the Levites must be scattered among all the tribes, where they maintain a working, ongoing relationship with the rest of the nation.

As previously mentioned, the tribe of Levi (which included both the *kohanim* and the Levites) took turns serving in the Temple. They were divided into twenty-four “watches,” with each watch serving in the Temple two weeks out of the year. The rest of the time they lived among the people, working to ensure that the people would stay in touch with the Torah and the Tradition.

Every citizen throughout the Land of Israel distributed offerings and tithes from his yearly produce not to a “collective Levitical fund,” but to individual *kohanim* and Levites of his own choosing. Thus, those members of the tribe of Levi who performed better as spiritual role models and teachers were assured a greater portion of the annual yield.

**(25-26) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Levites and say to them: When you receive from the Israelites their tithes, which I have assigned to you as your share, you shall set aside from them one-tenth of the tithe as a gift to the Lord:** As an assurance that the tribe of Levi will never repeat Korah’s error, they must separate one tenth of the tithe they receive from the Israelites (i.e., “one percent of the harvest,” *terumat maaser*), and pass it on to the *kohanim*. In our times, since there is no Temple and no Levitical service, the tithe that would be given to the Levite (*maaser*, “ten percent of the harvest”) need not be separated, because there are no Levites laying claim to it.

But *terumat maaser*, the “one percent of the harvest,” as mentioned just above, must be separated nonetheless, because that portion of the produce has sacred status, which cannot be disregarded – notwithstanding that no *kohen* is allowed to eat it – because the necessary state of ritual purity cannot be achieved in these times. Therefore, after *terumat maaser* is separated, it must simply be burned.

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This concludes the first of two parts of the book of Numbers. (Conceptually, that is. The Torah itself marks no such division here.)

The long period that will now ensue – thirty-eight years of wilderness wanderings, during which the generation of the Exodus will completely die out– is glossed over in almost complete silence by the Torah. The second part of the book, which begins here, will now fast-forward immediately to the very last year of the forty-year wilderness journey. Likewise, this *Biblical Dynamics* commentary will resume in part 2 with coverage of those fortieth-year events.

## § 14. THE BOOK OF NUMBERS, PART 2: GENERAL OVERVIEW

### § 14.1. THE STRUCTURE OF THE SECOND PART OF THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

The first half of the book of Numbers was devoted to the education of the Exodus generation, and dealt with the nation's internal problems.

The second half of the book of Numbers that begins here is all about educating a new generation, known as "the generation of the wilderness." The narrative unfolds around a series of confrontations with other nations, in the process of Israel's conquest of the Transjordan on their way to entering the Promised Land.

In this second part of the book of Numbers (as was the case in the books of Genesis and Exodus), the weekly portions are paired. The general scheme is as follows:

6. *Chukkat* (19:1-22:1) – Confrontation between nations (1 of 2), at the military-political level: "Realpolitik."

7. *Balak* (22:2-25:9) – Confrontation between nations (2 of 2) at the spiritual and mystical level.

8. *Pinchas* (25:10-30:1) – The final census after the wilderness wanderings. This section is paired with weekly portion 1, *Bemidbar*, the first weekly portion of this book of Numbers (see part 1). Together they form a pair of "brackets" that enclose the account of the forty-year journey through the wilderness.

9. *Mattot* (30:2-32:42) – Recovery after the wilderness wanderings (1 of 2). The nation's external problems.

10. *Mas'ei* (33:1-36:13) – Recovery after the wilderness wanderings (2 of 2). The nation's internal problems.

#### § 14.2. THE FORTIETH YEAR OF WILDERNESS WANDERINGS

*Chukkat* (literally, “legislation”), the sixth weekly portion in the book of Numbers, takes us immediately into the fortieth, final year of the Israelites' wilderness wanderings.

The Torah has almost nothing to say about the intermediate period of wanderings. From the second year following the Exodus it moves immediately to the fortieth and final year. Thus we infer that there were no critical events in the interim period of thirty-eight years. The people merely assimilated the lessons they had already received, and on that basis a new generation came of age.

But in the final year the situation has now changed. The time has come for a new generation to pass their tests in their confrontations with other nations, which serves as preparation for their entry into the Land of Israel. Weekly portions *Chukkat* and *Balak* are devoted to this topic.

The first of those two portions, *Chukkat*, describes the Israelites' political confrontations with the surrounding nations, in peace and in war. Only after that, in weekly portion *Balak*, will Israel's spiritual relationship with those other nations be described. In other words, the Jewish people must first emerge victorious in battle, and only then can they be taken seriously on the spiritual plane.

(We would do well to note that in our own times too, Israel's relations with the world at large are developing according to that same plan.)

#### § 14.3. CHANGE OF LEADERSHIP: MIRIAM, AARON, AND MOSES DEPART FROM THE WORLD STAGE

Weekly portion *Chukkat* speaks of a new generation and a change of leadership. There is also a transition from a world of miracles to a natural existence.

The miracles witnessed and experienced by the Israelites in the course of their wilderness journey relate directly to their three national leaders: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

Thanks to Moses, manna descended from the sky. Thanks to Aaron, there were clouds of Glory.<sup>58</sup> And in Miriam's merit a well accompanied the people everywhere they went, giving them water. These three "shepherds" miraculously provided the Jewish nation with all their needs: food, water, and protection from the elements. Therefore, as the nation prepares to move from their wilderness existence, the world of miracles, to the territory that they will possess and inhabit, a completely natural existence, all three of those leaders will depart from the scene.

But at the same time, the departure of those leaders and the cessation of miracles are not abrupt and immediate, but gradual.

Miriam dies first, in Kadesh, and contact with the nation of Edom begins. The journey through the wilderness continues, but its "miraculous" aspect has already drawn to a close, and life now begins in the inhabited wilderness regions. This means that there is no longer any need for a Divine well, and, accordingly, Miriam dies.

After Miriam's death a crisis of water begins, in which Moses and Aaron demonstrate that they are unable to correctly lead the nation's further development. Aaron dies next. Aaron is the symbol of peace, and due to his merits the people have had the clouds of Glory to protect them. But once the military campaign begins, the clouds of Glory are no longer needed.

Already at this stage the Divine decree has been handed down that Moses will not enter the Promised Land, which effectively means that he too will soon die. But the implementation of that sentence is postponed for one year, because Moses must lead the people to the very border of the Land of Israel, and, moreover, the falling of the manna daily also depends on him. Therefore, Moses will die one year hence, only just before the crossing of the Jordan, which officially marks the nation's entry into their new land.

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<sup>58</sup> See § 17.2 below.

We should note that, as it turns out, with the disappearance of Miriam's well the people still cannot survive without miracles, and "miraculous water" must return, if only in a more limited sense. But on the other hand, just when the clouds of Glory depart we see that the people are now able to cope with their new circumstances, and they defeat the king of Arad by their own efforts and without Divine intervention.

This transition from a miraculous to a natural existence reflects the different levels of Divine rule in the world, corresponding to different concepts of Divine reward and punishment. Under miraculous governance, everything is absolute, and punishment immediately follows sin, while under natural governance, this connection is hidden, and punishment can be postponed, or come from a different direction. As with Balaam, for example, who died not at the hand of the sword-bearing angel with whom he had an encounter on his way to curse the Jewish nation, but somewhat later, by the sword wielded by the Jewish army in the war with Midian.

This transition is similar to what we experience growing up. With miraculous governance, the reward and punishment that come immediately are more like obedience training than true education. Only natural governance teaches a person to take responsibility for his own life.

The transition from the miraculous world to the natural world must therefore occur gradually.

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Miriam, Aaron and Moses must die without crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land, because their mission is already complete. They cannot move on to the next historical phase, because their mere existence would interfere with the next stage in the people's development. All three are such exceptional leaders that in their presence no other leaders can display their leadership qualities, which would only fade in comparison.

The Midrash compares Moses to the sun, and Joshua the son of Nun (Moses' successor) to the moon. This comparison is intended to emphasize not so much the gap between their respective levels of

greatness as the difference between how they relate to others. When the sun is shining, no stars are visible. But when even the fullest, brightest moon shines at night, the stars too can be seen with no difficulty.

And by analogy, against the background of a leader of Moses' caliber no one else can realize his own greatness. Thus, in order to allow the stars to manifest, the "sun" must be removed, and leadership must be transferred to the "moon." That is, in order to enable a new generation of leaders, the old leaders must give way to them.



**WEEKLY  
PORTION 6**

**CHUKKAT**



## § 15. PURIFICATION BY THE RED COW

### § 15.1. THE COMMANDMENT OF THE RED COW (19:1-2)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאַל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: בּזֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר־  
צִוָּה יי לֵאמֹר דַּבֵּר | אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ פָּרָה אֲדָמָה תְּמִימָה  
אֲשֶׁר אֵין־בָּהּ מוּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָלָה עָלֶיהָ עֹל:

(1) **The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:**

(2) **This is the ritual law that the Lord has commanded: Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid.**

When our sages divided the Torah into fifty-four weekly portions, they decided that the commandment of the Red Cow (or, as it is sometimes called, the “Red Heifer”) should begin a weekly new portion, whose main theme, however, is the battles that the still nascent Jewish nation wages with the peoples of the world.

The division of the Torah portions is important for understanding the meaning of this commandment. A means of cleansing from the impurity of death is, first and foremost, an essential aspect of military operations. Before going to war it is important that provisions be made for such cleansing.

A person who has been defiled to a corpse is prohibited from entering the Temple without first being cleansed by the ashes of the Red Cow. This emphasizes that one must first be cleansed of death, and of evil, before there can be any possibility of advancing to the path of goodness and holiness.

**(2) To bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect:** To begin with, the Red Cow is a symbol of maximum vitality. The cow is the largest kosher domestic animal, and a female, moreover – which means that she can also give birth to new vitality. Her perfectly red color represents the exuberant vitality of the material world (the material world that is associated with *adam*, the “red color” of *adamah*, “earth, materiality”). And she must be entirely free of any blemish or flaw. Thus, she has in her the greatest concentration of completeness that can be achieved in any animal.

**A red cow without blemish:** The cow must be completely and flawlessly red. Even two black hairs (that is, two non-red hairs) render the cow unfit for this role.

But of course, this red color is not a bright red (like the color of a poppy flower, for example). Rather, it is the same red color that we mean when we say that a person is a “redhead” – a shade more like a golden orange-brown. In this sense the Red Cow also provides atonement for the sin of the golden calf.

**In which there is no defect:** It is a general requirement for all animal sacrifices that they be of only the best quality, free of any defect or mutilation.

(See Lev. 22:18-20: “When any man ... presents a burnt offering ... or any of the freewill offerings ... it must, to be acceptable in your favor, be a male without blemish, from cattle or sheep or goats. You shall not offer any that has a defect, for it will not be accepted in your favor.”)

**And on which no yoke has been laid:** That is, the vitality of this cow has never been diminished. To “bear the yoke” means to be deprived of one’s freedom. And life without freedom is not complete.

## § 15.2. HOW THE RED COW’S ASHES ARE PREPARED (19:3-10)

ג וַיִּנְתְּנֶם אֲתָהּ אֶל-אֲלֻעֶזֶר הַכֹּהֵן וְהוֹצִיא אֹתָהּ אֶל-מַחֲוֵץ לְמַחֲנֶה  
וְשַׁחַט אֹתָהּ לְפָנָיו: ד וּלְקַח אֲלֻעֶזֶר הַכֹּהֵן מִדָּמָה בְּאֶצְבָּעוֹ וְהָזָה אֶל-  
נֹכַח פְּנֵי אֹהֶל-מוֹעֵד מִדָּמָה שִׁבְעַת פְּעָמִים: ה וְשָׂרַף אֶת-הַפָּרָה לְעֵינָיו  
אֶת-עֶרְוָה וְאֶת-בְּשָׂרָהּ וְאֶת-דָּמָהּ עַל-פְּרָשָׁה יִשְׂרָף: ו וּלְקַח הַכֹּהֵן עֵץ  
אָרָז וְאֵזוֹב וְשִׁנֵי תוֹלַעַת וְהִשְׁלִיד אֶל-תוֹךְ שְׂרָפַת הַפָּרָה: ז וְכִבֶּס בְּגָדָיו

הִכְהִין וְרִחַץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם וְאַחֵר יָבֵא אֶל־הַמִּחֻנָּה וְטָמֵא הִכְהִין עַד־  
הָעֶרֶב: ה וְהִשְׂרַף אֹתָהּ יִכְבֵּס בְּגָדָיו בַּמַּיִם וְרִחַץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם וְטָמֵא  
עַד־הָעֶרֶב: ט וְאַסֵּף | אִישׁ טְהוֹר אֶת אֵפֶר הַפָּרָה וְהֵנִיחַ מִחוּץ לַמִּחֻנָּה  
בְּמָקוֹם טְהוֹר וְהִיטָה לְעֵדוֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁמַרְתָּ לְמִי נֹדֵה חֲטָאת  
הוּא: י וְכִבֵּס הָאִסֹּף אֶת־אֵפֶר הַפָּרָה אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְטָמֵא עַד־הָעֶרֶב  
וְהִיטָה לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִגְר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם לְחֻקֹּת עוֹלָם:

**You shall give it to Eleazar the priest. It shall be taken (3)  
outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence**

(4) Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his  
finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent  
of Meeting.

(5) The cow shall be burned in his sight – its hide, flesh, and  
blood shall be burned, its dung included –

(6) and the priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson  
stuff, and throw them into the fire consuming the cow.

(7) The priest shall wash his garments and bathe his body in  
water; after that the priest may reenter the camp, but he shall  
be unclean until evening.

(8) He who performed the burning shall also wash his garments  
in water, bathe his body in water, and be unclean until evening.

(9) A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the cow  
and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place, to be  
kept for water of lustration for the Israelite community. It is  
for cleansing.

(10) He who gathers up the ashes of the cow shall also wash  
his clothes and be unclean until evening. This shall be a  
permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who  
reside among you.

**(3) It shall be taken outside the camp:** The cow must be taken to  
an uninhabited place beyond the camp, because it will be turned into  
ash, which symbolizes complete destruction.

**(4) Shall take some of its blood ... and sprinkle it seven times  
toward the front of the Tent of Meeting:** Opposite the Temple exit  
and directly in line with it, as we shall now explain.

The Temple has several entrances/exits, all positioned in succession along the same straight line. The exit from the Holy of Holies leads into the main Temple premises, whose doors lead out to the inner courtyard, whence likewise to the outer courtyard, and from there finally to the outside. Thus, a person standing outside the Temple, but looking into the Temple such that his line of vision follows that straight line just described, will see the curtain that conceals the Holy of Holies. This creates a sense of connection with holiness, and, simultaneously, of withdrawal from it.

In the Temple that King Solomon built in Jerusalem, that straight line from the Holy of Holies and through the Temple exit led to the exact location on the Mount of Olives where the Red Cow was burned. Therefore, if through archaeological excavations we can determine the place where the Red Cow was burned, this will allow us to precisely identify the location of the Holy of Holies.

**And sprinkle it seven times:** Seven is the number of the days of Creation. It is therefore the number that symbolizes nature and naturalness.

**(5) The cow shall be burned in his sight – its hide, flesh, and blood shall be burned, its dung included:** The cow is burned entirely. This represents the complete destruction of natural life in all its aspects.

**(6) And the priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff, and throw them into the fire consuming the cow:** The cedar is the tallest of all trees, while hyssop grass is the lowest of all plants. “Crimson stuff” is woolen thread colored with the red dye obtained from a unique species of worm.

Thus we have a large cow and a small worm, a tall cedar and a low hyssop – a wide spectrum of animals and plants. And all this is burned together. That is, maximal vitality is collected from every angle, and is then completely destroyed, to become the very epitome of death.

**(7-10) The priest ... shall be unclean until evening. He who performed the burning shall ... be unclean until evening. He who gathers up the ashes ... shall ... be unclean until evening:** Everyone involved in preparing the ashes of the Red Cow is unclean. Since they do not see the process through to its conclusion, their action is seen as

only an aborted effort at achieving future vitality. (By this we mean the vitality that will follow the future resurrection of the dead. For as we will note below, it is that resurrection that the cleansing with the Red Cow's ashes symbolizes.)

Because such “non-attainment” of life is itself a source of impurity at the stage of preparation, the ashes and their water are unclean as well. Only at the very end of the process, when the ashes and the water are sprinkled on the person who is unclean, do they have the power to cleanse and purify.

The Mishnah reports that throughout the entire span of Jewish history, that is, from the moment the Tabernacle was dedicated in the wilderness after the Exodus, and until the destruction of the Second Temple – a period of over 1,400 years – the procedure for preparing the ashes of the Red Cow was performed only seven times.

The first of the seven Red Cows was slaughtered and burned under Moses' supervision. Its ashes were sufficient for the entire First Temple period. The next Red Cow was burned, and its ashes prepared, in the time of Ezra, after the return from the Babylonian captivity. And five more Red Cows were to follow, spanning the period of the Second Temple. After the second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, the rules and regulations of ritual purity were no longer applicable to daily life, and the laws of the Red Cow too were no longer observed.

### § 15.3. THE PURIFICATION PROCEDURE (19:11-22)

יא הַנִּגְעַת בְּמַת לְכָל־נֶפֶשׁ אָדָם וְטָמֵא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: יב הוּא יִתְחַטֵּא־בּוֹ  
 בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִטְהַר וְאִם־לֹא יִתְחַטֵּא בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי  
 וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי לֹא יִטְהַר: יג כָּל־הַנִּגְעַת בְּמַת בְּנֶפֶשׁ הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר־יָמוּת  
 וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא אֶת־מִשְׁכָּן יִי טָמֵא וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל כִּי מִי  
 נָדָה לֹא־זָרַק עָלָיו טָמֵא יְהִי עוֹד טְמֵאתוּ בוֹ: יד זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אָדָם  
 כִּי־יָמוּת בְּאֶהָל כָּל־הַבָּא אֶל־הָאֶהָל וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶהָל יִטָּמֵא שִׁבְעַת  
 יָמִים: טו וְכָל כְּלֵי פְתוּחַ אֲשֶׁר אִין־צִמִּיד פְּתִיל עָלָיו טָמֵא הוּא: טז וְכָל  
 אֲשֶׁר־יָגַע עַל־פְּנֵי הַשֹּׁדֶה בְּחַל־תְּרֵב אוֹ בְּמַת אוֹ־בַעֲצָם אָדָם אוֹ  
 בַּקֶּבֶר יִטָּמֵא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: יז וְלִקְחוּ לְטָמֵא מִעֵפֶר שְׂרָפַת הַחֲטָאת

וַנִּתֵּן עָלָיו מַיִם חַיִּים אֶל-כָּלִי: יַחַד וְלָקַח אֶזוֹב וְטָבַל בְּמַיִם אִישׁ טְהוֹר  
וְהִזָּה עַל-הָאֵהָל וְעַל-כָּל-הַכֵּלִים וְעַל-הַנֶּפֶשׁוֹת אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ שָׁם וְעַל-  
הַנֶּגַע בְּעָצָם אֹד וְבַחֲלָל אֹד בַּמֵּת אֹד בַּקֶּבֶר: יַחַד וְהִזָּה הַטְּהַר עַל-הַטֹּמֵא  
בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְחִטָּאוּ בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וַכִּבֵּס בַּגָּדָיו וְרַחֵץ  
בְּמַיִם וְטָהַר בְּעֶרְב: כִּי אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-יִטְמָא וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ  
הַהוּא מִתּוֹד הַקֹּהֵל כִּי אֶת-מִקְדָּשׁ יְיָ טִמָּא מִי נִדָּה לֹא-זָרַק עָלָיו  
טִמָּא הוּא: כִּי אִם וְהִיטָה לָהֶם לְחַקֵּת עוֹלָם וּמִזָּה מִי-הַנִּדָּה יַכִּבֵּס בַּגָּדָיו  
וְהַנֶּגַע בְּמֵי הַנִּדָּה יִטְמָא עַד-הָעֶרֶב: כִּי וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-יִגְעֹבוּ הַטֹּמֵא יִטְמָא  
וְהַנֶּפֶשׁ הַנֹּגַעַת טִמָּא עַד-הָעֶרֶב:

**(11) He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be unclean for seven days.**

**(12) He shall cleanse himself with it on the third day and on the seventh day, and then be clean; if he fails to cleanse himself on the third and seventh days, he shall not be clean.**

**(13) Whoever touches a corpse, the body of a person who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles the Lord's Tabernacle; that person shall be cut off from Israel. Since the water of lustration was not dashed on him, he remains unclean; his uncleanness is still upon him.**

**(14) This is the ritual: When a person dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be unclean seven days;**

**(15) and every open vessel, with no lid fastened down, shall be unclean.**

**(16) And in the open, anyone who touches a person who was killed or who died naturally, or human bone, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days.**

**(17) Some of the ashes from the fire of cleansing shall be taken for the unclean person, and fresh water shall be added to them in a vessel.**

**(18) A person who is clean shall take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle on the tent and on all the vessels and people who were there, or on him who touched the bones or the person who was killed or died naturally or the grave.**

(19) The clean person shall sprinkle it upon the unclean person on the third day and on the seventh day, thus cleansing him by the seventh day. He shall then wash his clothes and bathe in water, and at nightfall he shall be clean.

(20) If anyone who has become unclean fails to cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the congregation, for he has defiled the Lord's sanctuary. The water of lustration was not dashed on him: he is unclean.

(21) That shall be for them a law for all time. Further, he who sprinkled the water of lustration shall wash his clothes; and whoever touches the water of lustration shall be unclean until evening.

(22) Whatever that unclean person touches shall be unclean; and the person who touches him shall be unclean until evening.

**(11) He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be unclean for seven days:** Such uncleanness occurs when a living person comes in contact with (or, in some cases, merely in close proximity to) death. Death is the antithesis of life, and any person who has an encounter with it finds it highly unsettling. Moreover, the greater the degree of departure of life from this world, the higher the level of ritual impurity that results. Therefore, although the corpses of unclean animals also impart uncleanness, the impurity in that case is of a lower order. The very highest degree of impurity according to Torah law is the impurity transmitted by a human corpse.

**Shall be unclean:** A person who comes in contact with a corpse becomes unclean because he begins to perceive death as the end of his existence. The source of the impurity is not death itself, but that we treat death as the absolute finality of life, believing that nothing at all will follow after death. It is that feeling – that mistaken approach to life and death – that is the reason for the impurity.

That perception is fundamentally wrong. On a superficial level, death seems to overpower life, because everyone in the world is inescapably mortal. But when we take a deeper look we understand that life is actually stronger than death.

The meaning of the Red Cow, and the purification achieved through it, is that it symbolizes the return from death to life, the realization that death is not really final. The attitude that death can be overcome creates an understanding of the superiority of the life force. The feeling that life is stronger than death, as expressed through the procedure of the Red Cow, is what cleanses the unclean person of his impurity.

**Shall be unclean for seven days:** Seven days is the complete interval of time in nature, corresponding to the number of days in which God created the universe. (See the commentary to Num. 19:12 below).

**(12) He shall cleanse himself with it:** “It” means the mixture of the ashes of the Red Cow and the water. The ashes alone cannot effect purification, which can happen only when the water and ashes are sprinkled together. This purification is modeled after the resurrection of the dead, which the “living water” (Num. 19:17, literal translation) and ashes together symbolize, but the ashes alone do not.

Note that the correlation of the cleansing by the Red Cow with the resurrection from the dead shows that the idea of “overcoming death in order to achieve the fullness of life,” which is often believed to be a Christian concept, is in fact already found in the Torah. (In many ancient cultures the rite of passage is based on this idea.)

In Judaism, the concept that the fullness of life can overcome primordial death is realized at three levels. It refers collectively to all of humanity (expulsion from the Garden of Eden), to each individual (the fullness of life in the World to Come after resurrection from the dead), and, finally, to the Jewish people, in the sense that the modern State of Israel is a Jewish resurrection at the national level.<sup>59</sup>

**On the third day and on the seventh day:** The required purification cannot happen all at once. An intermediate stage of cleansing is needed.

**If he fails to cleanse himself on the third and seventh days, he shall not be clean:** Since the purification ends on the seventh day, which corresponds to the completion of the Seven Days of Creation, we can infer that the intermediate stage of purification, which happens on

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<sup>59</sup> This approach can be traced back to the Kabbalah of the Gaon of Vilna.

the third day, corresponds to the third day of Creation, on which plants were created and life first appeared.

Thus, we can say that the intermediate stage of the third day is the purification of the “minimal biological” human aspect, and that of the seventh day is the purification of the person *in toto*. Without preliminary purification at the biological level, it would be impossible to purify a person as a whole, because a living soul is incomplete without a body.

**(13) Defiles the Lord’s Tabernacle:** Without purification it is forbidden to enter the Temple, which represents the concentration of life. One must not enter the Temple without first cleansing himself of the influence of death.

**(14) This is the ritual:** The Hebrew text reads: *Zot ha-torah*, “this is the law.” But we can also translate it as, “This is the Torah,” which alludes to the idea that the ultimate purpose of the entire Torah is purification from death.

When a person dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent ... shall be unclean: Or, stated as a more general principle, so long as there is a corpse present in a domicile, impurity fills the entire space under the roof.

A tent represents civilization, which cannot develop properly as a whole if it does not have an attitude that allows it to overcome death. And that, in fact, is the very essence of this ritual of purification.

**(16) And in the open, anyone who touches a person who was killed:** Here the Torah emphasizes that the commandment of the Red Cow is being given just now as a preparation for war.

**(17) Some of the ashes from the fire of cleansing shall be taken for the unclean person, and fresh water shall be added to them in a vessel:** In the Hebrew text the water is called *mayim chayim*, literally, “living water.” (Note too that in the Torah, “vessel” when unqualified is assumed to mean an earthenware vessel.)

The preparation for the purification ends with a demonstration that something that has been completely burnt – representing death – is made living once again, which is the very model of the resurrection of the dead.

To accomplish that, the ashes of the Red Cow are placed in an earthen vessel (a symbol of the human body that was created from the dust of the earth, see Gen. 2:7) and “living water” (spring water that “flows of its own accord”) is poured into it. This symbolizes giving the body an animating soul. Soul and body are thus united, and the ashes, a symbol of death, are now a mixture of ashes and water in an earthen vessel, symbolizing resurrection from the dead.

**(21) He who sprinkled the water of lustration shall wash his clothes;** and whoever touches the water of lustration shall be unclean until evening: As noted earlier, only at the very end of the process do the water and ashes, sprinkled on the man defiled by death, purify him, through the symbolism of the resurrection of the dead.

Therefore, anyone who is involved in preparing or performing the purification process but does not see it through to completion represents the “non-attainment” of vitality and, consequently, he remains unclean.

#### § 15.4. “KING SOLOMON WAS UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND THE COMMANDMENT OF THE RED COW”

This chapter of the Red Cow begins with the word *chukkat*, “the ritual law of,” which also became the name of this entire weekly portion. The word *chukkah* (or its masculine equivalent *chok*, plural *chukkim*) is usually translated as “law” or “statute.” In the Talmudic tradition *chukkim* are, more specifically, “laws that defy rational analysis” (the laws of ritual purity and impurity, for example), as opposed to *mishpatim*, “rationally comprehensible laws” (e.g., the prohibition of stealing, and the punishment for violating it).

The commandment of the Red Cow is often cited as the classic example of a *chok*, a law that cannot be understood rationally, and must therefore be taken simply as a Divine order. In the words of the Midrash: “King Solomon, the wisest of all people, stated that although he understood the entire Torah, he could not understand the meaning of the Red Cow and its laws, which stipulate that the persons who

prepare the agent of purification become themselves unclean. This seems to controvert all logical, rational principles.”

We, however, have offered above fairly logical explanations of the features of this commandment (that is, to the extent that logic is at all applicable to this topic). What then about the Red Cow and its laws did King Solomon find so incomprehensible?

There are two possible answers to this question.

The first answer: of course Solomon had no trouble understanding everything about the Red Cow at its simple level of meaning. But as he aspired in everything to an extremely high level of understanding, he wanted to directly “feel,” as it were, the meaning of each commandment of the Torah. And here, in particular, he wanted to get an actual sense of how life passes into death and back again – to understand these transitions by, in some sense, experiencing them. But no human can possibly achieve an understanding of life and death at that level.

The second answer: Solomon understood this law at the individual level, but being a king, he needed to understand it also at the national level. However, Solomon’s kingdom had only a limited set of needs. His father David before him had already fought all the wars that had to be fought, whereas Solomon had no need to wage war, and he therefore sees the Red Cow as superfluous. The purpose of the Red Cow is purification from death, but for Solomon, at the state level, death looms rather small, and he does not feel its danger.

It would seem that it is a fine situation to be in, and that life in Solomon’s commonwealth, by that definition, was extraordinarily successful.

But we also know that Solomon’s death brought in its wake the complete disintegration of his remarkably successful state. Why was this? As it turns out, the absence of a constant threat of death leads to the loss of foundation. Of course, under Solomon individuals still died on the usual scale. But those deaths were a private matter, whereas war is the threat of death for the entire population.

Solomon believed that his state was strong. He built the Temple, and concerned himself only with problems of personal advancement. (He wrote the Song of Songs, which is all about love, and Ecclesiastes, reflections on the frailty of human existence). But besides ruminating

on metaphysical questions, a king must first and foremost deal with the realities, if he hopes to properly bequeath the state to the next generation.

Solomon gave all that but little thought, nor did he teach his son Rehoboam how to govern, or concern himself with giving the people an understanding of the foundations of their country's continued existence. Solomon's entire political system was based only on his personal charisma, and he made no effort to improve the structure of the state. It is no wonder, then, that immediately upon his death the kingdom collapsed. Thus, we can say that a feeling of constant danger is among the most important elements of survival, and the absence of that sense leads to disintegration of the state.

And that is why the Jewish people, although they have in every age teetered on the very brink of survival, have nonetheless survived longer than all other peoples. Ordinary peoples live a more or less secure existence, believing that this is simply the natural order of things. Any severe crisis can therefore do them in. But the Jewish people, even after seemingly endless cataclysms and devastations, just pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and get back on their feet. Thus they demonstrate a phenomenal ability to survive.

## § 16. WATER FROM THE ROCK

### § 16.1. THE DEATH OF MIRIAM AND A CRISIS OF WATER

(20:1-2)

א וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר־צֵן בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיָּשֶׁב הָעָם  
בְּקֶדֶשׁ וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם: ב וְלֹא־הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה וַיִּקְהָלוּ  
עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן:

(1) **The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.**

(2) **The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron.**

(1) **On the first new moon:** This is the beginning of the fortieth and final year in the wilderness.

**The Israelites arrived in a body:** Literally, “The Israelites, the entire congregation arrived.” The Midrash understands this as emphasizing the integrity of the community.

All who were destined to perish in the wilderness have already died, and those who are still alive at the beginning of the fortieth year will merit entering the Land of Israel. And therefore, after thirty-eight years of calm, in which no significant problems have arisen, the impatience now reappears. The people balk at continuing their wilderness journey, because they see no reason for it, now that the wilderness generation has completely died out. As they see it, the time has come to enter the

land and conquer it. But once again there is an inexplicable delay, and they find the anticipation unbearable.

**Miriam died there:** Because Miriam died before the episode of Moses smiting the rock, it is clear that her death was not a punishment for that sin (as Moses' and Aaron's deaths were). This demonstrates that the real issue was not about sin and punishment. Rather, more simply and objectively, the time had come for a change of leadership.

**(1-2) Miriam died there ... The community was without water:** The Torah connects Miriam's death with the sudden lack of water. The Midrash says that for thirty-nine years "Miriam's well" accompanied the Israelites everywhere they went in the wilderness – a block of stone from which water began to flow at each encampment. But when Miriam died this well stopped giving water and was lost among the stones of the wilderness.

## § 16.2. THE PEOPLE YEARN TO ENTER THE LAND OF ISRAEL (20:2-5)

בולא־הָיָה מִיָּמִים לְעֵדָה וַיִּקְהֵלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן: ג וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם עִם־  
מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא־מָר וְלוֹ גֹעַגְעוּ בַּגָּזַע אַחֵינוּ לִפְנֵי יְיָ: ד וְלָמָּה הִבַּאתֶם  
אֶת־קְהֵל יִי אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לָמוֹת שָׁם אֲנַחְנוּ וּבְעֵירָנוּ: ה וְלָמָּה  
הֵעֵלִיתֶנּוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהִבְיֵא אֲתָנוּ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם הַרְעֵה הַזֶּה לָא | מְקוֹם  
זָרַע וְתֵאֵנָה וְגִפְזָן וְרַמּוֹז וּמִיָּמִים אֵין לְשִׁתּוֹת:

(2) **The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron.**

(3) **The people quarreled with Moses, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of the Lord!**

(4) **Why have you brought the Lord's congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there?**

(5) **Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!"**

**(2) The community was without water:** Since having no access to water is obviously a very serious problem, their complaint cannot be considered unfounded. And in fact, as we shall soon see, the Almighty did not charge the people with rebelliousness or lack of faith because of it.

**(2-3) And they joined against Moses and Aaron. The people quarreled with Moses:** In the eyes of the people Aaron is not a leader. All their complaints are therefore directed toward Moses.

**The people quarreled with Moses:** Unlike the Korah rebellion (Num. 16:2), the people here only quarreled and expressed their grievances; they did not attack Moses, nor threaten him. Therefore, Moses felt no need to flee from the people.

**(5) A place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates:** This is a description of the Land of Israel as it was presented to the new generation – the goal of all their wanderings. They had been brought up on this description of the character of the Promised Land, which was well known from the episode of the spies (Num. 13:23), and so they now readily call it to mind, and it becomes the subject of their rumblings. The Egyptian foods were completely different: flesh pots, bread in abundance, fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic (Exod. 16:3, Num. 11:5). The new generation does not wax nostalgic about Egypt, nor do they yearn to return there. But they wish to emphasize that there was no point in leaving Egypt if the wilderness wanderings have not ended, and the goal has not been achieved. Moses, however, does not understand their issues, and his reflex reaction is to interpret their complaints as a desire to return to Egypt. This misunderstanding of the people's problems is the primary symptom of the crisis, and the main reason that Moses will be removed as a leader.

### § 16.3. REMOVING MOSES AND AARON FROM LEADERSHIP

There are many different opinions among the commentators as to what exactly was Moses' and Aaron's sin for which they were denied entry into the Land of Israel. Here are just a few of those:

- Instead of speaking to the rock, Moses struck it (Rashi).
- He struck the rock not once but twice (Ibn Ezra).
- He spoke to the people contemptuously, addressing them as “you rebels” (Maimonides).
- He demonstrated arrogance before God by implying that it was his prerogative to decide from which rock to extract water (Nachmanides).

But none of these “sins” seem so serious that Moses and Aaron would have been condemned to die in the wilderness on that account. Therefore, these commentators explain that when the Almighty exacts punishment from the world’s most righteous men, He does so with unusual strictness.

But Abarbanel adopts a different approach. After listing ten possible variations on “the disobedience for which Moses and Aaron were punished,” he rejects every one of them, because he considers them all nothing more than a pretext.

In Abarbanel’s opinion, Moses was punished for the sin of the spies, and Aaron for the sin of the golden calf. But the Torah, not wishing to equate their sins with the sins of the many others who sinned in those same incidents, prefers to not mention those sins explicitly in connection with Moses’ and Aaron’s punishment.

The problem with this approach is that the Torah explicitly mentions in three other places (Num. 20:24, 27:14 and Deut. 32:51) that Moses will not enter the Land of Israel specifically because of the incident of hitting the rock. It is therefore impossible to ignore this event here.

Moreover, the Midrash says that this moment is specifically mentioned in the Torah so that we will not think that Moses and Aaron are punished for a sin committed along with the rest of the people. Thus, the Midrash is telling us that we must not link their punishment to the incident of the spies or the golden calf.

The approach we take in this commentary is that hitting the rock with the staff was not the cause of the problem, but only an *indicator*. The actual problem was that Moses and Aaron could not ably lead the new generation of Jews, the “wilderness generation,” who were quite different from the generation of the Exodus. They understood

neither the difficulties nor the aspirations of this new generation. A leader must be able to understand the people he leads, and to correctly interpret their rumblings and grievances. If he cannot do that, he cannot be their leader.

This approach is made clear in the Torah when it says (Num. 20:12): “But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.’” Note the wording. It does not say, “therefore you shall not enter into the land,” but rather, “therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land.” That is, you cannot continue to be their leaders.

But actually, two separate problems are presented here: Moses’ inability to lead the new generation, and Aaron’s inability to continue performing his leadership functions because of the changing circumstances.

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Ever since Moses’ second descent from Mount Sinai his face had been covered with a veil (see Exod. 34:29 ff. and the *Bible Dynamics* commentary there). When Moses transmitted God’s teachings, that is, when he received Divine revelation and taught the people, his face shined visibly to all. But the rest of the time – in ordinary, everyday life – his face was covered by a veil.

This continued throughout the forty-year journey through the wilderness. In everyday life Moses was outside the limits of the people’s perception, and did not participate in that life at all. Moses lived outside the camp – with God, as it were – and the people lived separately from him.

This system, which treated the Divine teachings as distinct from everyday life, was needed in order to restrain the people’s religious fervor within a rigid framework, because it was the absence of such a framework that had led to the sin of the golden calf. But at the same time, Moses’ removal from the everyday life of the people led to a loss of understanding between him and the new generation that grew up in the wilderness.

Moses is the leader of the Exodus generation and is himself a member of that generation. Although he was never himself a slave, Moses grew accustomed early on to a peremptory style of leadership, the style of communicating with slaves. But this is now a new generation, and Moses proves himself incapable of communicating with a generation of free people.

As Moses sees it, forty years of wanderings in the wilderness have not changed the essential character of the people. But this is simply not so.

In another much earlier but similar incident soon after the Exodus (Exod. 17:6), God did actually order Moses to “smite the rock and water will issue it from it.” But now a new, different generation has grown up, with whom it is possible – and indeed necessary – to discuss and deliberate. They can no longer be led by smiting, as it were. Moses, however, remains blissfully unaware of all this.

The people have tired of their wilderness wanderings, and they want to begin their conquest of the land as soon as possible. But Moses is not hearing them.

\* \* \*

Aaron’s problem, however, is different. Aaron is not able to create the necessary opposition to Moses. And without such active opposition no system of government can function normally. We have noted previously that Moses’ and Aaron’s relationship, as the nation’s two leaders, is based on a certain “balance of opposites.” As discussed in the *Bible Dynamics* commentary on Exodus,<sup>60</sup> the weekly portions of that book from the outset alternate between the “portions of Moses” and “portions of Aaron.” When Moses ascends Mount Sinai, the opposition between the two brothers reaches its maximum (as underscored by Moses being above, on the mountain, while Aaron remains below). In acknowledgment of this opposition, the Torah describes, separately, Moses’ Temple and Aaron’s Temple, in weekly portions *Terumah* and *Tetzaveh*, respectively.

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<sup>60</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 2.3.

This causes a rift to form between Aaron and Moses, resulting in the creation of the golden calf. But a little later, in an attempt to correct the situation, each of the two portions *Vayakhel* and *Pekudei* combines both approaches. *Vayakhel* describes “Moses’ Temple supplemented by that of Aaron” and, conversely, *Pekudei* describes “Aaron’s Temple supplemented by that of Moses.” This creates a connection between the two approaches, thus bridging the gap between them.<sup>61</sup>

In the book of Exodus, which describes the beginning of their journey, Moses and Aaron govern the people jointly, and their functions find unification in the Temple. In any such situation of dual leadership conflicts are bound to arise, and especial care must be taken to assure that those conflicts can be properly resolved. But the very principle of uniting two lines of management into one is also what makes it possible for a balance to be maintained. In this weekly portion, however, as the wilderness journey draws nearer to its end, we see a rather different picture. Aaron plays no role whatsoever in the active leadership, and Moses’ leadership completely dominates.

Because the veil that covers Moses’ face alienates him from the people to some degree, he misjudges their problems. Aaron, however, wore no such veil – he was not that kind of “sacred leader.” We also read in the Midrash how Aaron was always a peacemaker. That is, he was in constant communication with the people and their problems, explaining to them what they did not understand on their own. Which meant that he had to understand people and engage with them.

But now it turns out that Aaron is in such a state of subordination to his brother that he has entirely lost his independence, and is unable even to tell Moses anything meaningful. This means that Aaron too is now failing to live up to his leadership responsibilities, and he too must therefore give way to the next generation.

Aaron’s mindset of subordination may have come about after he and Miriam spoke out against Moses, and were punished for that. This was necessary in order to properly educate the people,<sup>62</sup> but the result was that after that it was difficult for Aaron to stand up to Moses. But

<sup>61</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 29.1.

<sup>62</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 12.6.

this does not eliminate or even mitigate the problem. It matters little why Aaron cannot function as opposition to Moses. The only thing that matters is that he cannot.

Note that later, in the book of Deuteronomy, which is, as it were, Moses' "religiopolitical testament," he legislates that the Jewish state must be built on four mutually opposing branches of government, so that no one branch of power will become dominant, and the opposition will always be preserved. But that will happen only after Aaron's departure from the stage of history. (We will examine this topic in greater detail in our commentary to weekly portion 5, *Shofetim*, of Deuteronomy.)

#### § 16.4. MOSES' MISTAKE OF SMITING THE ROCK (20:6-11)

וַיֵּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן מִפְּנֵי הַקְּהָל אֶל־פְּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם  
וַיִּרְא כְבוֹד־יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיהֶם:

וַיִּזְדַּבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר: הֲקַח אֶת־הַמַּטֵּה וְהַקְּהַל אֶת־הָעֵדָה אֹתָהּ  
וְאַהֲרֹן אָחִיד וְדַבַּרְתֶּם אֶל־הַסֵּלַע לְעֵינֵיהֶם וְנָתַן מִימֵיו וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם  
מַיִם מִן־הַסֵּלַע וְהִשְׁקִיתָ אֶת־הָעֵדָה וְאֶת־בְּעִירָם: ט וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־  
הַמַּטֵּה מִלִּפְנֵי יְיָ בְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ: י וַיִּקְהֲלוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶת־הַקְּהָל אֶל־  
פְּנֵי הַסֵּלַע וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהֶם שְׁמַעוּ־נָא הַמַּרְיִם הַמִּן־הַסֵּלַע הֲזֶה נּוֹצֵיא לָכֶם  
מַיִם: יא וַיִּרְם מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיִּדָּךְ אֶת־הַסֵּלַע בְּמַטְהוֹ פַּעֲמָיִם וַיִּצְאוּ מַיִם  
רַבִּים וַתִּשְׁתֶּה הָעֵדָה וּבְעִירָם:

(6) Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces. The Presence of the Lord appeared to them,

(7) and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,

(8) "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts."

(9) **Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He had commanded him.**

(10) **Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?”**

(11) **And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.**

(6) **Moses and Aaron came away:** “Came away” here in the Hebrew is not *va-yavo’u*, but *va-yavo* – the singular form of the verb, although it refers to both Moses and Aaron. This emphasizes Aaron’s lack of independence. He conducts himself as a mere adjunct to Moses – an appendage, as it were.

(3, 6) **The people quarreled with Moses ... Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting:** We might ask: if the Torah wants to inform us where Moses and Aaron went next, why does it have to tell us that they were leaving the congregation? Don’t we already know that until now Moses and Aaron have been in conversation with the congregation?

But the Torah is emphasizing that Moses wishes to approach the Tabernacle precisely because he feels so much better there than with the people. The people have engaged with Moses in the hope of making themselves understood to him. But Moses abandons the conversation, because he has no desire to speak with the people. He only wants to be with God.

**And fell on their faces. The Presence of the Lord appeared to them:** They are at a loss to know what to do next. But the Almighty is prepared to help Moses find the right solution, and He gives Moses another chance.

(7) **And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:** The Almighty addresses only Moses, which again emphasizes Aaron’s lack of independence.

(8) **Take the rod and assemble the community:** The rod is a sign of leadership. A shepherd leads his sheep with his staff. But if necessary, he beats them with the same staff, effectively turning a tool of compassionate guidance into a weapon.

**You and your brother Aaron:** God now instructs them to act together.

**Order the rock to yield its water:** *Ve-dibbartem* is in the plural. “You shall (both) order the rock.” God wants Moses and Aaron to speak together.

**Before their very eyes:** Before the eyes of the community. The people must understand the importance and meaning of the dialogue that is taking place.

Before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock: The translation just given, “order the rock to yield its water,” makes certain assumptions that are not necessarily implied by the Hebrew. There are actually two ways to understand this verse.

The conventional interpretation is that God instructed Moses to speak to the rock, and thereby to get it to produce water. But alternatively, we can understand the verse as two separate commands: first, speak of the rock, that is, speak to the people about the rock, and then, second, produce water for them.

According to the first interpretation, the conventional one, by smiting the rock instead of speaking to it Moses acted in direct violation of God’s command. But according to the second interpretation, the Almighty was only giving Moses general guidelines, which Moses then chose not to accept. We can say that God gave Moses two options for communicating with the people, and of those options, Moses chose to smite rather than speak.

The second interpretation proposes that Moses was removed from his position of leadership not because he violated God’s order, but because in the Land of Israel the Israelites will no longer receive the constant, unambiguously direct Divine instructions that were the norm in the wilderness. Since the new generation will need to live and make decisions independently, the people should have been taught a lesson that Divine direction does not always take the form of direct commands, but sometimes consists of only guidelines, which require a person to determine his own path. Therefore, Moses too was given an ambiguous Divine instruction, and was expected to independently choose a more appropriate style of leadership.

**(9) Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He had commanded him:** It was Aaron’s staff, not Moses’ staff, that was kept in the Tabernacle “before the Lord.” (“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Put Aaron’s staff back before the Pact, to be kept as a lesson to rebels, so that their mutterings against Me may cease, lest they die.’ ” See Num. 17:25.) Thus, when God tells Moses to take the rod, He means that Moses should take Aaron’s rod; that is, Moses must learn to act as Aaron does. Aaron’s staff is not for giving orders. Aaron’s staff brings forth sprouts, produces blossoms, and bears almonds (Num. 17:23) – i.e., gives nourishment to all who come near it and interact with it. Aaron’s staff has life-giving force.

**(10) Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them:** Both Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation, just as the Almighty had commanded them. But when the time came to speak, only Moses spoke, which directly contravened the Almighty’s explicit instructions (*Ve-dibbartem*, plural, see Num. 20:8) that both Moses and Aaron were to speak together.

**Listen, you rebels:** Hebrew *morim*, “rebels” are an obstinate folk who repeat the mistakes of the past, even again and again, because they never learn their lesson. In Moses’ eyes that quite accurately describes these “rebels” whom he is now addressing. As he sees them, these people have not changed at all over the past forty years. Moses is under the impression that the people, having now encountered new difficulties, again want to return to Egypt. But Moses is misled, because the reality of the situation has completely changed. This is a new generation of Israelites, who yearn to conquer and possess the land.

Just a short time later the Almighty will use the same word to describe Moses and Aaron’s own obstinate rebelliousness in this very incident. “Let Aaron be gathered to his kin: he is not to enter the land that I have assigned to the Israelite people, because you disobeyed [Hebrew, *meritem*] my command about the waters of Meribah” (Num. 20:24). This emphasizes that it was Moses, actually, who failed to learn and adapt, and was therefore unable to acknowledge that the people had changed. Effectively, then, he was projecting his own limitations onto the people.

**Shall we get water for you out of this rock?:** Moses feels that he must restore his absolute authority in the eyes of the people. He therefore speaks as if it is his prerogative to decide from which rock to extract water.

**(11) And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod:** He struck the rock with his own rod, not with Aaron’s rod. That is, Moses was instructed to abandon his style of leadership and to adopt Aaron’s instead, but he only continues to act as before.

**And struck the rock twice:** There is clearly no need for Moses to strike the rock twice. Thus, Moses demonstrates his insistence on using his own style of leadership, emphasizing his stubborn adherence to a peremptory style of wielding power.

Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank: The result is that although Moses has succeeded locally, he has failed globally.

§ 16.5. THE PUNISHMENT: “THEREFORE YOU SHALL NOT COME TO THE LAND” (20:12-13)

יב וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאַל־אַהֲרֹן יַעַן לֹא־הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי  
לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת־הַקֶּהֶל הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־  
נָתַתִּי לָהֶם: יג הִמָּה מִי מְרִיבָה אֲשֶׁר־רָבוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־יְי וַיִּקְדָּשׁ  
בָּם:

(12) **But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.”**

(13) **Those are the Waters of Meribah – meaning that the Israelites quarrelled with the Lord – through which He affirmed His sanctity.**

**(12) But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron:** Because you did not trust Me enough: These words are often translated as, “because you did not believe in Me.” But “trusted” is a more accurate rendering,

because the issue here is trust in God, not merely faith in Him. (For a detailed discussion of the idea of “faith as a process,” see the § 16.6 below.)

**To affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people:** The hallmark of holiness is a constant increase in the level of dialogue and mutual understanding. Moses and Aaron have failed to advance the people in their understanding of their dialogue with the Almighty.

**Therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land:** Not “therefore you shall not enter”, but “therefore you shall not lead this congregation.” You cannot continue to be leaders. That is, this is not a personal punishment, but only a statement of fact, that Moses and Aaron are unable to continue leading the people, and the logical consequence of that fact.

**Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people ... He affirmed His sanctity:** Here the contrast between Moses’ actions and the Almighty’s actions is highlighted. Because Moses did not affirm the Almighty’s sanctity, God had to do it Himself.

**(13) Those are the Waters of Meribah ... through which He affirmed His sanctity:** Advancement must continue and does, even if this requires removing a man as great as Moses from leadership. The passage of time demands that leadership styles will be updated, and this means that no leader, even the most outstanding, can operate in any era but his own. Each new generation must be guided by new leaders, and not bemoan that it is no longer led by the old ones.

## § 16.6. RELIGIOUS FAITH AS A PROCESS

The Torah here formulates the problem of Moses as: “Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity.”

The Midrash sees a connection between these words spoken here by God to Moses and Moses’ very own words to the Almighty at the burning bush, with reference to the Jewish people: “Moses spoke up and said, ‘What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me?’ ” (Exod. 4:1). And now, God speaks of Moses himself in almost exactly the same words: “Because you did not trust Me enough.”

The Hebrew words *ya'aminu*, “believe” and *he'emantem*, “trust” are in fact the same word, except that the former is third-person future tense, and the latter is second-person past tense. I.e., “they will believe” and “you [plural] believed,” respectively. Moreover, that same verb *ha'amen* is used to mean either “to believe” or “to trust.” The Midrash wants us to see the irony here. Moses suspected the Jews of being deficient in their belief, but they in fact believed, while Moses himself lacked faith at the moment that he hit the rock.

But what does Moses' lack of faith actually mean? Of course, this is not a question of Moses' belief in the existence of God or in Divine revelation. Rather, the issue at hand is belief in God as the driver of the historical process.

\* \* \*

We usually perceive religious faith as a “state.” This person is a believer, but the other is not, or this one believes more and the other less. But the Torah sees the concept of *emunah*, “faith,” as not a state but a process. From that perspective, *emunah* is not simply belief in the existence of God, but trusting in God in the face of the increasingly difficult situations that a person experiences.

For example, in the celebrated account of the Covenant Between the Pieces, when the Torah says that “because Abraham put his trust in the Lord, God reckoned it to his merit” (Gen. 15:6), it does not mean trust or faith in the modern sense. After all, Abraham believed in God even before that, and here too, since he is talking with the Almighty, there is obviously no problem of faith in the simple, conventional sense.

Rather, it is about trusting God's participation in the of historical process – understanding that the course of history is directed from Above. And believing that even when some moments of that process appear to take a negative turn and achieving success seems impossible, the process as a whole is nonetheless moving in a positive direction, and the Divine light will manifest in the world through that process.

The Midrash sees a connection between Moses' words at the burning bush, “What if they do not believe me?”, and the Almighty's words here at the rock, “Because you did not trust Me enough.” In

both cases it was difficult for Moses to depart from his preconceived notions. He had developed a very definite and rather critical opinion of the people long before, and even now he was still unable to see and acknowledge that they had in fact progressed to a new, higher level of spiritual advancement.

In the episode of the burning bush Moses was reluctant to undertake leading the Jews out of Egypt, because his personal experience had shown him that they were not yet ready to earn their freedom. He based that conclusion mainly on an incident that had occurred decades earlier. When Moses had killed the Egyptian overseer, and very soon thereafter tried to reconcile two Jews caught up in a physical conflict, they mockingly rejected what they considered his presumptuous attempt to intervene in their lives (Exod. 2:14).

And so, when God much later proposed to Moses that he return to Egypt with the mission of leading the Jews to freedom, Moses considered that a pointless exercise, because, in his view, the Jews had not changed. But Moses was wrong; the people had in fact changed, as the Torah makes clear when it tells us that after Pharaoh's death and the rise of a new monarch to power, "the Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them" (Exod. 2:23-25). But Moses was wholly unaware of that, nor did he believe that the people were capable of experiencing any kind of independent development.

Thus, Moses' "lack of faith" to which God refers is his lack of faith in the people's independent development. As Moses see it, the Israelites are able to advance only under the influence of a leader. This is because Moses is so close to Heaven, and to the highest attainable values – which in itself is of course exceptionally praiseworthy, but the downside is that he has no faith in anyone who is beneath his level to be able to achieve independent advancement.

And now, at the end of his life, the same situation has arisen. Moses again fails to understand that he is dealing with a new generation, who require a completely different approach. Thus, Moses' lack of

confidence in the faith of others has now become a lack of faith in himself.

In the modern era, we can draw an analogy to the way religious leaders initially reacted with resistance to the Zionist movement. Those leaders believed that since the Zionist movement consisted mainly of people who did not believe in God, no Divine light could come from them. Those religious leaders could not believe that the creation of the State of Israel, a non-religious state, was happening by Divine decree. Thus, what they claimed was their lack of faith in the Zionist movement and its members turned out to be only a lack of faith in themselves.

Thus, faith is not a state, but a process. The essence of faith consists not only in acknowledging the existence of God or in observing His commandments, but in trusting the historical process as directed by Divine providence.

## § 17. WATER FROM THE ROCK

### § 17.1. NEGOTIATIONS WITH EDMON (20:14-21)

יִשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה מַלְאָכִים מִקַּדְשׁ אֶל־מֶלֶךְ אֲדוֹם כֹּה אָמַר אֶתִּידֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
אֲתָה יְדֹעֶת אֵת כָּל־הַתְּלָאָה אֲשֶׁר מָצָאתָנוּ: טו וַיֵּרְדוּ אֲבֹתֵינוּ מִצְרָיִמָה  
וַנֵּשֶׁב בְּמִצְרַיִם יָמִים רַבִּים וַיִּרְעוּ לָנוּ מִצְרַיִם וְלֹא־בִיתָנוּ: טז וַנִּצְעַק אֶל־  
יְיָ וַיִּשְׁמַע קוֹלָנוּ וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָךְ וַיִּצְאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וְהִנֵּה אַנְחָנוּ בְּקַדְשׁ  
עִיר קֶצֶה גְבוּלָךְ: יז נַעֲבְרָה־נָּא בְּאַרְצְךָ לֹא נַעֲבֹל בְּשָׂדֶה וּבְכָרֶם וְלֹא  
נִשְׁתֶּה מִי בְּאֵר דָּרֶךְ הַמֶּלֶךְ נִלְדָּךְ לֹא נִטֶּה יָמִין וּשְׂמֹאל עַד אֲשֶׁר־  
נַעֲבֹר גְּבוּלָךְ: יח וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲדוֹם לֹא תַעֲבֹר בִּי פֶן־בַּחֲרַב אֵצְא  
לְקִרְאָתְךָ: יט וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִסְלָה נַעֲלֶה וְאִם־מִיָּמִיד  
נִשְׁתֶּה אָנֹכִי וּמִקְנֵי וְנִתְתִּי מִכָּרֶם רַק אִי־דָבַר בְּרִגְלֵי אַעֲבְרָה: כ וַיֹּאמֶר  
לֹא תַעֲבֹר וַיִּצְא אֲדוֹם לְקִרְאָתוֹ בְּעַם כְּבֹד וּבְיַד חֲזָקָה: כא וַיִּמָּאֵן  
אֲדוֹם נֹתֵן אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל עֹבֵר בְּגְבוּלוֹ וַיִּט יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעַלְיוֹ:

(14) From Kadesh, Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom: "Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the hardships that have befallen us;

(15) that our ancestors went down to Egypt, that we dwelt in Egypt a long time, and that the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our ancestors.

(16) We cried to the Lord and He heard our plea, and He sent a messenger who freed us from Egypt. Now we are in Kadesh, the town on the border of your territory.

(17) **Allow us, then, to cross your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells. We will follow the king's highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the left until we have crossed your territory."**

(18) **But Edom answered him, "You shall not pass through us, else we will go out against you with the sword."**

(19) **"We will keep to the beaten track," the Israelites said to them, "and if we or our cattle drink your water, we will pay for it. We ask only for passage on foot – it is but a small matter."**

(20) **But they replied, "You shall not pass through!" And Edom went out against them in heavy force, strongly armed.**

(21) **So Edom would not let Israel cross their territory, and Israel turned away from them.**

**(14) Moses sent messengers:** Until now the people have been guided in their movements by the clouds of Glory. But now, Moses as their leader independently decides what route they should take. This is just one aspect of the paradigm shift that is now taking place in the life of the Israelites, as they transition from a supernatural life to a natural existence.

**(14) From Kadesh, Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom:** Kadesh was located southwest of the Dead Sea, and the nearest entry to the Promised Land was from the south, through the Negev. Thirty-eight years earlier, after the return of the spies, when the people tried to force their way into the land along this route, they suffered heavy losses (see Num. 14:40 ff.). Thus, the southern approach was now closed off to them psychologically, and so they had to begin the conquest of Canaan from the east, which meant they had to pass through the lands of Edom and Moab.

In the *Bible Dynamics* commentary to the book of Deuteronomy we will discuss in greater detail the reasons that this detour was chosen, given the significant difficulties it presented, both from the physical and political points of view.

**Messengers to the king of Edom:** After exiting from the uninhabited wilderness the Israelites now enter the populated regions, where contact with the inhabitants of those areas begins. Until now, the new generation has been reared in the depths of the wilderness, in uninhabited regions where they had no contact with other peoples, and where they survived only thanks to the manna and Miriam's well. Now, the completion of the educational process for this new generation must happen through contact and conflict with the peoples of the world.

**(14-15) Thus says your brother Israel: "You know all the hardships that have befallen us ... that our ancestors went down to Egypt:** The Midrash explains these words as a justification for the request that Israel be allowed to pass through Edom's territory.

Edom is of course Israel's "brother" because they are the direct descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, whose twelve sons were the immediate progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. In order to justify his request that Edom allow Israel to pass through their territory, Moses recalls that the land of Canaan was their common inheritance from Abraham (Jacob and Esau's grandfather). God had promised Abraham: "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years ... And they shall return here in the fourth generation" (Gen. 15:13-16). "They shall return here" means that after being redeemed from their Egyptian bondage Israel would return to the land of Canaan to possess it. "Thus," Moses is saying to Edom, "we, Israel, endured the burdens of Egyptian slavery; you did not. Therefore, you must let us pass through your territory in order to reach the land of Canaan, which is our rightful inheritance.

**(17) Allow us, then, to cross your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells. We will follow the king's highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the left until we have crossed your territory.":** The "king's highway" mentioned here was one of the most important roads of the ancient world. Running along the eastern shore of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River, it was a primary trade route between Mesopotamia and Egypt.

For the Israelites, the king's highway was the fastest and most direct approach to the Jordan, which flows into the Dead Sea from the north, and which they needed to cross from east to west in order to enter the future Land of Israel. Since the king's highway was an established international route used by foreign (i.e., non-Edom) travelers, the Israelites were hoping that Edom would allow them to take it.

**(19-20) "We will keep to the beaten track," the Israelites said to them, "and if we or our cattle drink your water, we will pay for it. We ask only for passage on foot" ... But they replied, "You shall not pass through!":** Israel's repeated request and Edom's repeated refusal in this particular episode should serve as an important lesson to Israel also for the broader scope of Jewish history. Namely: that it is futile to expect that if the Jews demonstrate peaceful intentions to other peoples, those peoples will necessarily respond in kind.

**(21) So Edom would not let Israel cross their territory, and Israel turned away from them:** The Israelites should have realized that realpolitik for them was now in the domain of the natural, not the supernatural. Previously, if some individual or nation refused to acquiesce to the Divine plan, God would simply intervene and brush them aside. But now the Israelites are forced to lead a political life based on natural principles, and this means that sometimes they will have no choice but to retreat.

**And Israel turned away from them:** We should note how the situation is described here. It is not God who tells Moses to disengage with Edom; rather, Israel itself decides to retreat.<sup>65</sup> Besides the affinity that Israel feels towards Edom (cf. Deut. 23:8: "You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your kinsman"), they did so because at this time the people were not yet prepared for war. Remember that this is happening even before Aaron's death (see the § 17.2 below), which means that the clouds of Glory are still affording protection to the Israelites. Only gradually will the people come to understand that in the Promised Land wars are an inevitable fact of life.

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<sup>65</sup> Later, in Deut. 2:6, the Torah presents a different version of these events, which we will cover in the *Biblical Dynamics* commentary there.

When Israel decided not to go to war with Edom, this was interpreted by the surrounding peoples as evidence of weakness. As a result, neither were those peoples afraid to demonstrate their overt hostility toward Israel, and in the end this was just cause for their destruction. That is, Israel's apparent weakness was engineered from Above as a necessary measure for triggering a "strategic provocation."

And yet, none of the foregoing exonerates Edom of their guilt for refusing passage to Israel. The prophet Obadiah, who prophesied much later against Edom, predicted severe retribution and even complete annihilation for Edom, because they denied passage to the Jewish people.

#### § 17.2. THE DEATH OF AARON (20:22-29)

כב ויסעו מקדש ויבאו בני־ישראל כל־העדה הַר הַהַר: כג ויאמר יי אל־מֹשֶׁה וְאַל־אַהֲרֹן בְּהַר הַהַר עַל־גְּבוּל אֶרֶץ־אֲדוֹם לֵאמֹר: כד יאסף אַהֲרֹן אֶל־עַמּוּי כִּי לֹא יבֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל אֲשֶׁר־מְרִיתֶם אֶת־פִּי לְמִי מְרִיבָה: כה קח אֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת־אַלְעָזָר בְּנֵו וְהֵעַל אֹתָם הַר הַהַר: כו וְהִפְשֵׁט אֶת־אַהֲרֹן אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְהַלְבִּשְׁתֶּם אֶת־אַלְעָזָר בְּנֵו וְאַהֲרֹן יֹאסֵף וּמַת שָׁם: כז וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי וַיַּעֲלֵו אֶל־הַר הַהַר לְעֵינֵי כָל־הָעֵדָה: כח וַיִּפְשֹׁט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־אַהֲרֹן אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיַּלְבֵּשׁ אֹתָם אֶת־אַלְעָזָר בְּנֵו וַיָּמַת אַהֲרֹן שָׁם בְּרֹאשׁ הַהַר וַיֵּרֶד מֹשֶׁה וְאַלְעָזָר מִן־הַהַר: כט וַיֵּרָאוּ כָל־הָעֵדָה כִּי גָעַ אַהֲרֹן וַיִּבְכוּ אֶת־אַהֲרֹן שְׁלֵשִׁים יוֹם כָּל בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל:

(22) Setting out from Kadesh, the Israelites arrived in a body at Mount Hor.

(23) At Mount Hor, on the boundary of the land of Edom, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron,

(24) "Let Aaron be gathered to his kin: he is not to enter the land that I have assigned to the Israelite people, because you disobeyed my command about the waters of Meribah.

(25) Take Aaron and his son Eleazar and bring them up on Mount Hor.

(26) **Strip Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar. There Aaron shall be gathered unto the dead.**

(27) **Moses did as the Lord had commanded. They ascended Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community.**

(28) **Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar, and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain. When Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain,**

(29) **the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days.**

(22) **The Israelites arrived in a body:** Literally, “The children of Israel, the entire congregation, arrived.” With this apparent redundancy the Torah is emphasizing that in the aftermath of the conflict at the waters of Meribah, unity has now been restored.

(24) **Because you disobeyed my command about the waters of Meribah:** In the Hebrew, “disobeyed” is *meritem*, literally, “you (plural) rebelled.” There, by the waters of Meribah, Moses had castigated the people by calling them *morim*, “rebels” (Num. 20:10), which derives from the same verbal root, *M-R-H*, as *meritem* here. It thus turns out that the very same character flaw of which Moses accused the people applies in fact, in the Almighty’s own words, to *them*, Moses and Aaron.

(25) **Take Aaron and his son Eleazar and bring them up on Mount Hor:** In the people’s conception, the High Priest and the Temple are always associated only with life, and removed from death (see Lev. 21:1 ff.). Therefore, Aaron’s death must take place at a distance, away from the people.

(26) **Strip Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar:** Notice that it is Moses – not Aaron – who here initiates Eleazar into the office of High Priest. This shows that Moses is the true chief of the priests, while Aaron is only his deputy. And this is still no less true now than it was long before, when the priests were first ordained (see Lev. 8).

**And put them on his son Eleazar:** The Midrash observes that Aaron was more fortunate than Moses, in that he saw his son take his

place as High Priest, whereas Moses was unable to convey to either of his sons any aspect of his legacy.

**(29) The whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last:** That is, because Aaron had been such an influential presence in the life of the nation, his death radically changed their situation.

Moreover, the Midrash tells us that since it had been in Aaron's merit that the clouds of Glory accompanied Israel in the wilderness, as soon as he died the clouds of Glory also departed. That meant that the Jews had lost their invulnerability, and were open to attack. Which is in fact what now immediately happens. Because Aaron symbolizes peace, he must die before the outbreak of hostilities.

Aaron was still alive when Israel made their request of Edom to be allowed to travel the king's highway through their territory. And although Edom refused, there was no war with Edom, because Israel simply retreated. But when the time came for Israel to engage with the nations in war, Aaron's presence was inconsistent with any such action. Aaron therefore died between the peace negotiations (with Edom) and the outbreak of hostilities (with Arad).

**All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days:** The Torah tells us here that Aaron was mourned upon his death by "all the house of Israel." But Moses, as we shall see later, will be mourned by only the *benei yisra'el*, "the sons of Israel" (Deut. 34:8, literal translation).

Aaron was even more beloved than Moses, and his death was therefore felt more keenly and more widely. Moses was primarily a teacher of Torah, and to that extent he engaged mostly with the men. But Aaron was a peacemaker, particularly in families, which meant that his influence was felt by all – men and women alike, and especially in the realm of domestic relations – "all the house of Israel."

Aaron, unlike Moses, did not govern. He interacted with the people on a personal level, primarily for resolving conflicts. Moses, on the other hand, was a tough and demanding leader.

**(29) Thirty days:** Thirty days is the standard Jewish period of mourning. For Jacob, however, the mourning lasted seventy days, in accordance with the Egyptian custom, because Jacob was mourned nationally, and not only by his family. "The Egyptians bewailed him [Jacob] seventy days" (Gen. 50:3).

## § 17.3. THE BATTLE WITH THE KING OF ARAD (21:1-3)

א וישמע הכנעני מלך־ערד ישב הנגב כי בא ישראל דרך האַתְרִים  
 וילחם בישראל וישב | ממנו שבי: ב ויזר ישראל גדר לוי ויאמר  
 אִם־נָתַן תָּתִן אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה בְּיָדִי וְהִחַרְמְתִי אֶת־עָרֵיהֶם: ג וישמע יי  
 בְּקוֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־הַכְּנַעֲנִי וַיַּחֲרֵם אֶתְהֶם וְאֶת־עָרֵיהֶם וַיִּקְרָא  
 שֵׁם־הַמְּקוֹם חֶרְמָה:

- (1) **When the Canaanite, king of Arad, who dwelt in the Negeb, learned that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he engaged Israel in battle and took some of them captive.**
- (2) **Then Israel made a vow to the Lord and said, “If You deliver this people into our hand, we will proscribe their towns.”**
- (3) **The Lord heeded Israel’s plea and delivered up the Canaanites; and they and their cities were proscribed. So that place was named Hormah.**

**(1) When the Canaanite, king of Arad ... learned that Israel was coming ... he engaged Israel in battle:** During the entire thirty-nine years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness no one had attacked them (with the sole exception of Amalek immediately after the Exodus, see Exod. 17:8 ff.). But now that Aaron is gone, the clouds of Glory have departed, and the attacks begin.

**When the Canaanite, king of Arad, who dwelt in the Negeb learned:** It is not entirely clear where exactly the king of Arad was living, and whether this Arad corresponds to the modern-day settlement in the Negev of the same name. It is also unclear why the Israelites did not capture and populate the territory of Arad’s kingdom, as they did with Sihon and Og. If the kingdom of Arad was in Canaan, then why did Israel, after claiming the victory, not advance through that territory to Canaan? Why did they detour around the Dead Sea instead?

Moreover, we find a similar episode in the Book of Joshua (12:14) – also a battle with the king of Arad. Nachmanides therefore believes that the seizure of the kingdom of Arad actually took place later, and that its appearance here in the Torah is essentially an anachronism. In other words, this passage was retrofitted into the Torah in Joshua’s era.

Perhaps this means that Arad's attack on the Israelites began in the precise chronological sequence reported here, immediately after Aaron's death, but it ended only later, under Joshua, with the defeat of Arad during the conquest of Canaan. And therefore, to ensure the story's integrity, the report of Arad's defeat was inserted here only later, after the victory had been finally won under Joshua's leadership.

Be that as it may, and regardless of the actual chronology of events, our first obligation is to understand the Torah's account by following the sequence in which it is presented. This allows us to discern what the Torah is trying to convey, namely – that the military restructuring of the nation is being driven by the exigencies of the situation, and not by the people's own initiative. Even when we do not wish to fight, sometimes life leaves us no alternative, and fight we must.

**He engaged Israel in battle and took some of them captive:** Once captives have been taken, Israel has no choice but to enter the fray. In the larger context, this conflict was needed in order to prepare the people for conquering the land, by advancing them from their earlier pacific mindset to a new worldview of military realities.

**(2) Then Israel made a vow to the Lord and said, "If You deliver this people into our hand, we will proscribe their towns.":** Here, to "proscribe" is to utterly destroy, meaning that they would take no spoils for themselves. The purpose of this military operation was not to advance Israel's economic interests, but to intimidate the inhabitants of Canaan; that is, not for any current benefit, but as a strategic turning point. And this is the true meaning of the vow: striving for strategic objectives, not merely tactical gain.

Overall, these three verses demonstrate a shift from the pacifist strategy that the Jewish people had initially adopted to a willingness to fully engage with their enemies. Aaron's death serves as the symbolic turning point between these two strategies.

## § 18. THE COPPER SERPENT

### § 18.1. A DISSATISFIED NATION AND BITING SERPENTS (21:4-7)

דַּוִּי־סָעוּ מֵהַר הָהָר דְּרָדָד יַם־סוּף לְסַבֵּב אֶת־אֶרֶץ אֲדוֹם וְתַקְצֹר  
נַפְשֵׁי־הָעָם בְּדֶרֶדֶד הַיַּם וְהַיַּבֵּשׁ הָעֵם בְּאֵלֵהֶם וּבְמִשֶּׁה לְמַה הֵעֲלִיתָנוּ  
מִמִּצְרַיִם לָמוֹת בַּמִּדְבָּר כִּי אֵין לָחֶם וְאֵין מַיִם וְנַפְשֵׁנוּ קָצָה בְּלֶחֶם  
הַקִּלְקֵל וְיִשְׁלַח יְיָ בְּעַם אֶת הַנְּחָשִׁים הַשָּׂרְפִים וַיִּנְשְׁכוּ אֶת־הָעָם  
וַיָּמָת עֲסָרָב מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּבְאֵ הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ חֲטָאנוּ כִּי־  
דִּבַּרְנוּ בְּיַד וְבָדָד הַתְּפִלָּל אֶל־יְיָ וַיִּסַּר מֵעֲלֵינוּ אֶת־הַנְּחָשׁ וַיִּתְּפִלֵּל מֹשֶׁה  
בְּעַד הָעָם:

(4) They set out from Mount Hor by way of the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey,

(5) and the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food.”

(6) The Lord sent seraph serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died.

(7) The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Intercede with the Lord to take away the serpents from us!” And Moses interceded for the people.

**(4) They set out from Mount Hor by way of the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom:** In order to bypass Edom they had to travel southward from their current position in the Negev region toward Eilat and the the Sea of Reeds. But this was also the route leading back to Egypt.

**But the people grew restive on the journey:** Not only the difficulty of the journey itself, but the very direction of movement – which was now leading them not toward Canaan but further away from it – took a heavy toll on the people. They had thought that they were close to entering the Land, but now once again it is far from clear where they are being led, and how long the journey will last.

**(5) And the people spoke against God and against Moses:** If we compare the rumblings of this generation with those of the previous one, we notice an important difference. Here for the first time we see complaints lodged not only against Moses, but even against God.

Unlike the previous generation, who in their griping always believed that only Moses was responsible for the Exodus, this new generation understands that it was the Almighty Who had brought them out of Egypt. We can therefore say that the altered nature of their complaints testifies to the spiritual advancement of the people.

Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food: And we also notice another significant difference. Here the people are complaining not about the Exodus, but that they are making insufficient progress toward reaching their final destination. The new generation is prepared to fight and to conquer their Land, and their ordeal consists in being commanded to avoid military engagement with certain nations, and having to tread a longer, roundabout path to their destination, the Promised Land.

**(5) There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food:** The people's refusal to continue the journey is expressed in their rejection of the miraculous wilderness lifestyle to which they are accustomed. After all, they have food in the form of manna. And we must assume that they have water too, for we have not be told otherwise. But the people are saying: "We no longer want supernatural food and water. We want natural food."

In essence, they are not talking about the food itself, but about its quality – the suitability of the food. They associate the wilderness food with their wanderings, and the food no longer suits them any more than the wanderings do. They therefore want to change it.

**This miserable food:** They are referring to the manna, of course. The Hebrew *ha-kelokel* is an unusual word that appears nowhere else in Tanakh, but seems quite close to *kilkul*, “ruination, disintegration.” Or it is an intensified form of *kal*, “lightweight, lacking substance.”

As the people approach inhabited regions and the borders of the Land of Israel itself, they want normal food, food that has weight and a tangible essence. They want real meat, not a meat substitute, the manna, however good its quality. They want to experience the taste of meat by eating real meat. Overall, we must consider this desire a positive development.

**(6) The Lord sent seraph serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died:** This is God’s answer. “You want naturalness, and you want nature. But you fail to understand that it is still too early for those. If I remove your supernatural protections, nature will destroy you.”

Before the transition to natural life, which will happen soon enough, the people must understand that without turning to God, they cannot survive in the natural world. Their desire for independence has come before they are physically able to sustain it. Although that desire is a generally positive tendency, it requires correction.

**Seraph serpents:** Such serpents are called *seraphim* (singular *saraph*, the same word that later in Jewish tradition came to be the name of certain angels of exalted standing). It derives from the Hebrew root *S-R-PH*, which means to burn, a reference to the poisonous bite of these serpents, which causes a painful sensation similar to burning. These serpents represent an expression of the natural principle in the world.<sup>64</sup> Because the Israelites sought prematurely to activate the natural principle of their environment, their punishment was expressed in an invasion of serpents.

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<sup>64</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on Exod. 4:3.

(7) **The people ... said, “We sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you:** The people are already recognizing and acknowledging their wrongful ways.

**The people came to Moses and said, “... Intercede with the Lord ...”:** In ancient times, ordinary people felt they were unworthy of addressing the Creator directly. Instead, praying to the Almighty was the prerogative of prophets, whom the people would petition to pray to God on their behalf.

#### § 18.2. THE SERPENT MOUNTED ON A STANDARD (21:8-9)

ח וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עֲשֵׂה לְךָ שָׂרָף וְשִׂים אֹתוֹ עַל־גֹּסֶס וְהָיָה כָּל־  
הַנִּשְׁוֹדֵד וְרָאָה אֹתוֹ וְחָי: ט וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה נָחָשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת וַיִּשְׁמְהוּ עַל־הַגֹּסֶס  
וְהָיָה אִם־נִשְׁדָּד הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֶת־אִישׁ וְהִבִּיט אֶל־נְחֹשֶׁת הַנְּחֹשֶׁת וְחָי:

(8) **Then the Lord said to Moses, “Make a seraph figure and mount it on a standard. And if anyone who is bitten looks at it, he shall recover.”**

(9) **Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a standard; and when anyone was bitten by a serpent, he would look at the copper serpent and recover.**

(8) **If anyone who is bitten looks at it, he shall recover:** The Mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 3:8) comments on this: “Could the copper serpent itself kill or preserve life? [Obviously not.] Rather, when the Jewish people turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were healed, but if not, they pined away.” Because the appearance of the serpents was the result of the people’s attempt to activate the natural principle, it was necessary to redirect this natural principle – turning it, as it were, toward Heaven.

Note that the serpents are not removed, as the people had requested: “Intercede with the Lord to take away the serpents from us!” (Num. 21:7). God only creates an antidote. As the Midrash explains it, the meaning of the serpent on the standard is that when we turn our gaze toward Heaven, we should not be trying to push nature aside, but

to understand it and learn from it. The natural force of the serpent is not eliminated, but only redirected.

**(8) Make a seraph figure and mount it on a standard:** Earlier in this Bible Dynamics commentary (on Exod. 4:3) we discussed the opposing concepts of *iggul* and *kav*, “circle” and “straight line,” as representing nature and Divinity, respectfully. The context there, like here, involved a serpent, whose natural, coiled state is a prime example of the roundness-of-nature principle.

In this passage here, the standard (shaft) on which God commands Moses to mount the copper serpent, is perfectly straight. Thus we have a serpent entwined around a pole – the symbolic juxtaposition of roundness and straightness, which represents the perception of all things natural as the realization of the Divinity that resides within it.<sup>65</sup>

**Here the Israelites are saying:** “We no longer have any need for the miraculous, for the Divine. Nature and naturalness are what we want.” And the Almighty answers: “When you begin to absolutize naturalness, you will be bitten. In order to survive in Israel’s natural environment, you need to understand that in general, nature (the serpent) is only superficially independent; in reality it is guided by Divinity (the shaft) from within. Naturalness must therefore be perceived as a form of Divine manifestation. A person who has been bitten, but who then gazes at the serpent on the pole, begins to see the world correctly, and is healed.”

**(9) Moses made a copper serpent:** In the previous verse, God did not specify the material from which Moses was to make the seraph figure. But this verse tell us that Moses made *nechash nechoshet*, “a copper serpent.”

*Nachash* (here *nechash*, as required by the grammar) is the most common Hebrew word for a “snake” or “serpent,” and linguistically appears to be related in some sense to *nechoshet*, “copper.” We have

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<sup>65</sup> Likewise, a cherub with “a fiery, ever-turning sword” protects the entrance to the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:24) after Adam and Eve are driven out. But in that situation, the circular visual effect of the spinning sword is deceptive, because that spinning is actually “straight within itself.”

already had occasion to note<sup>66</sup> that in matters of holiness, copper represents the idea of channeling one's natural passions in a more noble direction. The copper serpent was eventually given a permanent place in the Temple. However, the book of Kings (2 Kings 18:4) reports that in a later era the people took to worshipping this serpent, and King Hezekiah (with the approval of the sages) therefore destroyed it.

This demonstrates an important principle. Something that was originally valid and proper (Moses' copper serpent, in this case) will sometimes become subsequently absolutized, because the people later forget that it was only an instrument for achieving a higher objective, and they instead turn it into an object of idolatry. At that point, the object, although inherently quite legitimate, must be destroyed, in order to restore the correct human connection with the Divine. And in fact, Jewish tradition understands even the destruction of the Temple itself in a similar light.

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<sup>66</sup> We saw this in connection with the copper laver that stood in the outer courtyard of the Tabernacle (Exod. 30:18). See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 26.3.

## § 19. THE CONQUEST OF THE TRANSJORDAN

### § 19.1. JOURNEYS AND ENCAMPMENTS EN ROUTE TO THE LAND OF ISRAEL (21:10-20)

י וַיִּסְעוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּאַבְתָּ: יא וַיִּסְעוּ מֵאַבְתָּ וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּעֵי הָעֲבָרִים  
בְּמִדְבַר אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי מוֹאָב מִמִּזְרַח הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ: יב מִשָּׁם נָסְעוּ וַיַּחֲנוּ  
בְּנַחַל זֶרֶד: יג מִשָּׁם נָסְעוּ וַיַּחֲנוּ מֵעֵבֶר אַרְנוֹן אֲשֶׁר בְּמִדְבַר הַיַּצָּא מִגְּבֹל  
הָאֲמֹרִי כִי אַרְנוֹן גְּבֹל מוֹאָב בֵּין מוֹאָב וּבֵין הָאֲמֹרִי: יד עַל־כֵּן יֹאמֵר  
בְּסֵפֶר מִלְחָמָת יי אֶת־וְהָב בְּסוּפָה וְאֶת־הַנְּחָלִים אַרְנוֹן: טו וְאֲשֶׁר  
הַנְּחָלִים אֲשֶׁר נָטָה לְשִׁבְתָ עַר וְנִשְׁעַן לְגְבוֹל מוֹאָב: טז וּמִשָּׁם בָּאָרָה  
הוּא הַבְּאֵר אֲשֶׁר אָמַר יי לַמֶּשֶׁה אֲסֹף אֶת־הָעָם וְאֶתְנַה לָּהֶם מַיִם:  
יז אַז יִשְׁעִיר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת עָלַי בְּאֵר עֵנוּ־לָהּ: יח בְּאֵר  
חֲפְרוּהָ שְׂרִים כְּרוּהָ נְדִיבֵי הָעָם בְּמַחֲקָה בְּמִשְׁעָנֹתָם וּמִמִּדְבַר  
מִתְנַה: טז וּמִמִּתְנַה נַחֲלִיאֵל וּמִנַּחֲלִיאֵל בְּמֹת: כ וּמִבְּמֹת הַגִּיאָ אֲשֶׁר  
בְּשִׂדֵה מוֹאָב רָאשׁ הַפְּסָגָה וְנִשְׁקָפָה עַל־פְּנֵי הַיְשִׁימוֹן:

(10) The Israelites marched on and encamped at Oboth.

(11) They set out from Oboth and encamped at Iye abarim, in the wilderness bordering on Moab to the east.

(12) From there they set out and encamped at the wadi Zered.

(13) From there they set out and encamped beyond the Arnon, that is, in the wilderness that extends from the territory

**of the Amorites. For the Arnon is the boundary of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites.**

(14) **Therefore the Book of the Wars of the Lord speaks of “... Waheb in Suphah, and the wadis: the Arnon**

(15) **with its tributary wadis, stretched along the settled country of Ar, hugging the territory of Moab ...”**

(16) **And from there to Beer, which is the well where the Lord said to Moses, “Assemble the people that I may give them water.”**

(17) **Then Israel sang this song: Spring up, O well – sing to it –**

(18) **The well which the chieftains dug, Which the nobles of the people started with maces, with their own staffs. And from Midbar to Mattanah,**

(19) **and from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth,**

(20) **and from Bamoth to the valley that is in the country of Moab, at the peak of Pisgah, overlooking the wasteland.**

(11) **They set out from Oboth and encamped at Iye abarim, in the wilderness bordering on Moab to the east:** After resolving their relationship with Edom, Israel’s next problem is their relationship with Moab.

(13) **From there they set out and encamped beyond the Arnon, that is, in the wilderness that extends from the territory of the Amorites. For the Arnon is the boundary of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites:** Here the Torah describes a detour around the land of the Moabites, along its eastern boundary, before the route crosses over to the northern bank of the Arnon River, which flows into the Dead Sea. To its south is the land of Moab, and on the north – the land of Sihon, king of the Amorites.

**Beyond the Arnon ... For the Arnon is the boundary of Moab:** The Israelites did not cross the Moab boundary. The Torah does not explain here the reason why they bypassed the Moabite lands, but

the books of Deuteronomy (2:29) and Judges (11:17) clarify that the Moabites, like Edom, refused to allow Israel to pass through their land.

**(14) Therefore the Book of the Wars of the Lord speaks of Waheb in Suphah:** This “Book of the Wars of the Lord” is not mentioned anywhere else in Tanakh, nor is it entirely clear what it was. Apparently, it was a book that extolled the miracles through which God brought the Jewish people salvation from their enemies.

**(14-15) Waheb in Suphah, and the wadis: the Arnon with its tributary wadis, stretched along the settled country of Ar, hugging the territory of Moab:** This excerpt from the “Book of the Wars of the Lord” is all but incomprehensible. The Midrash considers “Waheb” a derivative of *yahav*, “gifts, miracles,” and “Suphah” – the equivalent of Yam Suf, the Sea of Reeds, and explains these words as follows. Just as the Almighty had performed a great miracle at the crossing of Sea of Reeds immediately after the Exodus, so did He perform a miracle here at the Arnon wadis. The blood of the Amorites, who wished to annihilate the Jewish people passing near their lands, was shed there, and flowed like a river. A rock from the gorge through which the Arnon flows “hugged the territory of Moab,” that is, it pressed upon a rock on the opposite bank, crushing the Amorites who were sitting in the crevices of the cliff, waiting in ambush for the approaching Israelites.

**(16-18) Which is the well where the Lord said to Moses, “Assemble the people that I may give them water.” Then Israel sang this song: Spring up, O well – sing to it – The well which the chieftains dug, Which the nobles of the people started with maces, with their own staffs:** The Torah does not elaborate on the incident involving this well, but it does tell us that:

- The Almighty provided water.
- The people had to dig a well. That is, complaining was not going to accomplish anything. In order to have water they had to invest actual physical labor.
- The people thanked the chieftains for their involvement, because only the tribal leaders could have organized the work of digging the well.

- The Midrash understands from the words “Spring up, O well – sing to it” that even after the well had been dug, the water would not rise until the people broke forth in song. That is, physical labor was necessary but not alone sufficient. Spiritual work was needed here as well.

**Which the nobles of the people started with maces, with their own staffs:** It is unlikely that the nobles themselves dug the well. Rather, the maces and staffs are mentioned as symbols of power. In other words, the well was dug under the auspices of the nobles.

Thus, the transition from the miraculous to the natural continues. The well cannot possibly be dug without human initiative and effort. But this process is combined with the understanding that it is nonetheless the Almighty who provides the water. This also reveals a new and completely different attitude to the national leadership: respect and gratitude for their work, and an understanding of its importance. This song that the people sing demonstrates their progress toward becoming a normal society.

**(17) Then Israel sang this song:** These words echo the opening words of the song that was sung at the splitting of the Red Sea: “Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord” (Exod. 15:1). Thus, there was a song at the beginning of the journey through the wilderness, and now there is also a song at the end of that journey. When we compare the two songs, we see immediately that at the beginning of the journey it was Moses who sang first, and the people only then accompanied him. But here, Israel sings with no prompting from Moses. The generation that had just left Egypt had to wait for direction, but this new generation acts on its own. The ability to break into song spontaneously is an important achievement, because it is one of the qualities demonstrated by people who are genuinely free.

The Midrash sees in this change also a shift in the nature of the Revelation. At crossing of the Sea of Reeds, the important thing was for the people to “have faith in the Lord and His servant Moses” (Exod. 14:31). This type of Revelation came from Above, and then through Moses, almost without making direct contact with the people

themselves. But in the next generation, prophecy would already be transmitted with the people's active participation. Thus, the well that the people dug here was a different kind of Revelation, in which it was the people who were now acting, not Moses.

**(20) That is in the country of Moab, at the peak of Pisgah:** Pisgah is a mountain range that towers over the Moab plateau. Its highest point is Mount Nebo, the mountain on which Moses died (Deut. 34:1). Thus there is a hint here of the imminent completion of Moses' mission.

In the process of detouring round about the lands of Edom and Moab, a new generation has experienced a crisis, has learned to solve problems independently with the aid of the copper serpent, has come to understand the importance of their own labors for extracting water, and has achieved more correct relations within society. Thus, even just these few months have prepared the people for life in their new land. They are now ready to wage war for its conquest.

## § 19.2. THE WAR WITH SIHON, KING OF THE AMORITES

(21:21-30)

כא וישלח ישראל מלאכים אל-סיחון מלך-האמרי לאמר: כב אעברך  
 בארצך לא נטה בשדה ובכרם לא נשתה מי באר בדרך המלך  
 גלך עד אשר-נעבר גבלך: כג ולא-נתן סיחון את-ישראל עבר בגבלו  
 ויאסף סיחון את-כל-עמו ויצא לקראת ישראל המדברה ויבא  
 יהצה וילחם בישראל: כד ויבהו ישראל לפי-חרב וירש את-ארצו  
 מארזן עד-יביל עד-בני עמון כי עז גבול בני עמון: כה ויקח ישראל  
 את כל-הערים האלה וישב ישראל בכל-ערי האמרי בחשבון  
 ובכל-בנתיה: כו כי חשבון עיר סיחון מלך האמרי הוא והוא נלחם  
 במלך מואב הראשון ויקח את-כל-ארצו מידו עד-ארזן: כז על-כן  
 יאמרו המשלים באו חשבון תבנה ותכונן עיר סיחון: כח כִּי-אֵשׁ  
 יצאה מחשבון להבה מקרית סיחון אכלה ער מואב בעלי במות  
 ארזן: כט אוי-לך מואב אבדת עם-כמוש נתן בניו פליטם ובנתיו  
 בשבית למלך אמרי סיחון: ל ונירם אבד חשבון עד-דיבן ונשים עד-  
 נפח אשר עד-מידבא:

(21) Israel now sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying,

(22) “Let me pass through your country. We will not turn off into fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells. We will follow the king’s highway until we have crossed your territory.”

(23) But Sihon would not let Israel pass through his territory. Sihon gathered all his people and went out against Israel in the wilderness. He came to Jahaz and engaged Israel in battle.

(24) But Israel put them to the sword, and took possession of their land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as [Az] of the Ammonites, for Az marked the boundary of the Ammonites.

(25) Israel took all those towns. And Israel settled in all the towns of the Amorites, in Heshbon and all its dependencies.

(26) Now Heshbon was the city of Sihon king of the Amorites, who had fought against a former king of Moab and taken all his land from him as far as the Arnon.

(27) Therefore the bards would recite: “Come to Heshbon; firmly built and well founded is Sihon’s city.

(28) For fire went forth from Heshbon, Flame from Sihon’s city, Consuming Ar of Moab, The lords of Bamoth by the Arnon.

(29) Woe to you, O Moab! You are undone, O people of Chemosh! His sons are rendered fugitive and his daughters captive By an Amorite king, Sihon.”

(30) Yet we have cast them down utterly, Heshbon along with Dibon; We have wrought desolation at Nophah, which is hard by Medeba.

(21) Israel now sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying: The kingdom of Sihon occupied a strip along the Jordan, and it was impossible for Israel to avoid traversing it.

(22) “Let me pass through your country. We will not turn off into fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells. We will

follow the king's highway until we have crossed your territory": This request is quite similar to that with which the Israelites appealed to Edom (and Moab as well). At first they are peacefully disposed towards Sihon.

**(23) But Sihon would not let Israel pass through his territory:** In those previous similar instances Israel had simply retreated. Sihon therefore concluded that this was a weak people, with whom there was no need to stand on ceremony.

**Sihon gathered all his people and went out against Israel in the wilderness battle:** Sihon goes out to fight forthwith, seeing no reason to at least begin with a verbal refusal, as Edom did.

**He came to Jahaz and engaged Israel in battle:** The city of Jahaz was located on the eastern border of Sihon's territory.

**(24) But Israel put them to the sword, and took possession of their land:** This was Israel's first real victory on their way to conquering the land. They established a base and secured their rear, which allowed them to prepare to cross the Jordan. But even more importantly, they gained confidence in their abilities and saw a clear manifestation of the Almighty's support.

**From the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as [Az] of the Ammonites, for Az marked the boundary of the Ammonites:** Alternatively, az can be understood as not a proper noun, the name of a place, but an ordinary adjective indicating "strength and invulnerability." Thus, this verse would read: "And Israel smote him with the edge of the sword, and possessed his land the Arnon unto the Jabbok, even unto the children of Ammon; for the border of the children of Ammon was strong."

The latter part of this verse is a description of the lands of Sihon, a strip that lay along the Jordan. The Arnon was the southern boundary of the kingdom of Sihon (with Moab), while the northern boundary (with Bashan and the kingdom of Og) lay along the Jabbok River. The Ammonites lived east of Sihon's kingdom. Their capital was Rabbah of the Ammonites (Deut. 3:11), today's Amman, the capital of modern-day Jordan.

Sihon conquered the lands of Moab, but could not penetrate the territory of the Ammonites, because (as per the alternate translation) their border was impregnable. The words “for the border of the children of Ammon was strong” can also be understood as a restriction placed on Israel. That is, the Almighty forbade the seizure of the lands of the Ammonites (just as He did with respect to Edom and Moab) because they were descendants of Lot (see Deut. 2:19).

**(25) And Israel settled in all the towns of the Amorites, in Heshbon and all its dependencies:** Heshbon was located east of the Jordan River, opposite Jericho.

**(26) Now Heshbon was the city of Sihon king of the Amorites, who had fought against a former king of Moab and taken all his land from him as far as the Arnon:** That is, Sihon had seized the lands of Moab even before that. Israel was prohibited from waging war against Moab, but since Moab had already ceded their land to Sihon, Israel now had the right to seize it.

**(27) Therefore the bards would recite:** Come to Heshbon: The following text that the “bards” would recite reflects the mood of Sihon, rejoicing in his victory over Moab. The Midrash therefore believes that these bards are none other than Balaam and his father Beor.

(Here, “the bards,” in the original Hebrew is *ha-moshelim*, literally, “the makers of parables.” A parable in Hebrew is *mashal*, which is the very same word with which the Torah describes Balaam’s prophecies, first in Num. 23:7, and many times again in that chapter and the following one.)

According to the Midrash, Balaam and Beor’s contribution to Sihon’s war against Moab was in the form of witchcraft. When Sihon could not take possession of Heshbon, a fortified city, he hired those two “bards” to put a curse on Heshbon. And that is why Balak later says to Balaam: “Come then, put a curse upon this people [Israel] ... for I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed” (Num. 22:6). How did Balak know that? From the war of Sihon and Moab.

Thus, the Torah gives us a detailed exposition of these “parables” as an introduction to the political climate of the time, and its bearing on the episode of Israel and Balaam, which will follow very soon.

**(29) Woe to you, O Moab! You are undone, O people of Chemosh! His sons are rendered fugitive And his daughters captive:** Chemosh is the national deity of the Moabites. In those days it was natural and accepted that the success or failure of a given people would be interpreted by the surrounding nations as the success or failure of the religious doctrines that that people espoused.

**(30) Yet we have cast them down utterly, Heshbon along with Dibon; we have wrought desolation at Nophah, which is hard by Medeba:** This verse already speaks of the defeat of Sihon; that is, it was inserted by Israel. Thus, the old picture of the world is not dismantled; the Jewish view is merely built on top of it. This is an example of the general Jewish attitude and approach to the world, which, rather than ignoring other cultural layers, rethinks them and integrates them into itself.<sup>67</sup>

### § 19.3. THE BATTLE WITH KING OG OF BASHAN (21:31-35)

לא ויִשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ הָאֲמֹרִי: לִב וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה לְרַגֵּל אֶת־יַעֲזָר  
וַיִּלְכְּדוּ בְנֵתְיָהּ וַיִּרְשׁ (וַיִּזְרַשׁ) אֶת־הָאֲמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם: לֵב וַיִּפְּנוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ  
דֶרֶךְ הַבְּשָׁן וַיֵּצֵא עֹג מֶלֶךְ־הַבְּשָׁן לִקְרֹאתָם הוּא וְכָל־עַמּוֹ לַמְּלַחְמָה  
אֲדָרְעִי: לֵב וַיֹּאמֶר יִי אֱלֹהֵי־מֹשֶׁה אֵל־תִּירָא אֲתוֹ כִּי בִי־דָף נִתְּתִי אֲתוֹ  
וְאֶת־כָּל־עַמּוֹ וְאֶת־אֲרָצוֹ וְעָשִׂיתָ לוֹ כְּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ לְסִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֲמֹרִי  
אֲשֶׁר יוֹשֵׁב בְּחֶשְׁבּוֹן: לֵב וַיִּכּוּ אֲתוֹ וְאֶת־בָּנָיו וְאֶת־כָּל־עַמּוֹ עַד־בְּלֹתִי  
הַשָּׂאִיר־לוֹ שְׂרִיד וַיִּירְשׁוּ אֶת־אֲרָצוֹ:

**(31) So Israel occupied the land of the Amorites.**

**(32) Then Moses sent to spy out Jazer, and they captured its dependencies and dispossessed the Amorites who were there.**

<sup>67</sup> This principle applies, for example, to the *tefillin*. See Bible Dynamics on Exod. 4:4 and 13:9.

**(33) They marched on and went up the road to Bashan, and King Og of Bashan, with all his people, came out to Edrei to engage them in battle.**

**(34) But the Lord said to Moses, “Do not fear him, for I give him and all his people and his land into your hand. You shall do to him as you did to Sihon king of the Amorites who dwelt in Heshbon.”**

**(35) They defeated him and his sons and all his people, until no remnant was left him; and they took possession of his country.**

**(31) So Israel occupied the land of the Amorites:** Not merely “temporarily settled in,” but “occupied”; that is, Israel now considered that land its own territory.

The Transjordan region should in principle be considered an integral part of the Land of Israel. It does not, however, have the same degree of sanctity as the territory of Canaan, and therefore, when Israel first settled in the Transjordan region and then subsequently in Canaan, this was problematic. We shall take a closer look at this below (see § 28).

**(32) Then Moses sent to spy out Jazer, and they captured its dependencies and dispossessed the Amorites who were there:** Moses sent spies only to gather intelligence, but the spies went beyond their commission, and undertook a military operation to actually seize the territory. The people now feel confident in their strength, and are already asserting their right to ownership of the land. Exercising this newfound military independence is their preparation for the conquest of Canaan.

**(33) They marched on and went up the road to Bashan, and King Og of Bashan ... came out:** Bashan is the territory southeast of the Golan. The Israelites have decided to occupy the entire region of the Transjordan, except for the lands of Ammon and Moab.

From the text here it would seem that Moses began this conquest on his own initiative. But from the book of Chronicles (1 Chron. 2:21, 7:14) we learn that Bashan and the Golan had been allotted to the tribe

of Manasseh even while Joseph still reigned in Egypt as second-in-command to Pharaoh. Thus, they were only reclaiming their property as its rightful owners.

**(33-34) And King Og of Bashan ... came out ... to engage them in battle. But the Lord said to Moses, “Do not fear him:** As the forces of the detachment sent to spy out Jazer were not sufficient for doing battle with Og, the whole army now goes to war.

**(34) I give him and all his people and his land into your hand. You shall do to him as you did to Sihon king of the Amorites:** The Almighty confirms the right of the Israelites to conquer this region.

**You shall do to him as you did to Sihon:** The Midrash sees these two kings, Sihon and Og, as representing the two archetypal forces that have opposed Israel throughout history. Sihon, whose capital is Heshbon, is eloquent (*sichah*, “talk, conversation”) and calculating (*heshbon*, “calculation”). But Og, on the contrary, represents natural crudeness in its most primitive form. (This is why the Torah calls him a giant, and tells us the dimensions of his huge bed, see Deut. 3:11.)

Thus, on the one hand, it is difficult for the Jewish people to fight calculating demagogues, because of their eloquence: one is sometimes led to believe that there is a measure of truth in their words. But on the other hand, fighting primitive crudeness can likewise present a major challenge, because cultured people tend to succumb to a savage’s unbridled wrath and brute strength. Sihon and Og are thus two contrasting forces, but whose effect in either case is to prevent entry into the Land of Israel. Both of these forces must be neutralized in the process of conquering the land.

**(35) They defeated him and his sons and all his people, until no remnant was left him; and they took possession of his country:** A separate and important issue here is the morality of Israel’s behavior in the wars of that time. We shall discuss that question below (see § 27).

## § 19.4. ENCAMPMENT IN THE STEPPES OF MOAB (22:1)

א וַיִּסְעוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּעַרְבֹת מוֹאָב מֵעֶבֶר לְיַרְדֵּן יְרִיחוֹ:

(1) **The Israelites then marched on and encamped in the steppes of Moab, across the Jordan from Jericho.**

**(1) The Israelites then marched on:** After returning from the war with Og.

**And encamped in the steppes of Moab, across the Jordan from Jericho:** That is, they occupied the lands that had formerly belonged to Sihon. The region of that kingdom adjacent to the Jordan and opposite Jericho was called “the steppes of Moab,” reflecting their former ownership. Apparently, the Moabites continued to live in those locales even while Sihon ruled them. This also explains why later the women of Moab are in close enough proximity to the camp of Israel to become a serious problem (Num. 25:1).

**Across the Jordan from Jericho:** Since the possession and conquest of the land will begin here, at Jericho, the nation’s arrival at Jericho means that the wilderness wanderings are now officially concluded.

**In the steppes of Moab:** The important of this place is not only geographical. A renewal of God’s Covenant will take place here, as we shall discuss in the *Bible Dynamics* commentary to the book of Deuteronomy.



**WEEKLY  
PORTION 7**

**BALAK**



## § 20. BALAAM'S INVITATION

### § 20.1. "BALAAM'S BOOK" AND THE VIEW FROM THE SIDELINES

As noted earlier, weekly portions *Chukkat* and *Balak* both relate to Israel's confrontations with the peoples of the world. Weekly portion *Chukkat*, just concluded, deals with Israel's military conflicts with the nations. And portion *Balak*, which begins here, speaks of spiritual confrontation, from the viewpoint of the prophet Balaam.

Although the majority of its content consists of Balaam's prophecies, this weekly portion is named not for Balaam, but for Balak, the king of Moab, who engaged Balaam for his services, to curse Israel. This emphasizes that this portion's theme is not prophecy *per se*, but the relationship of the Jewish people to the nations of the world, which is what Balak represents here.

The excerpts containing Balaam's prophecies are accorded a special status in the Book of Numbers, as they provide an outside perspective on the Jewish people. Taken together, these passages are sometimes called "The Book of Balaam." As discussed earlier in our commentary (see Num. 10:29), contained within the Torah's five books there are, as it were, two additional, separate books that offer us a unique, supplementary view of the Jewish people. These are "the Book of Balaam" and "the Book of Jethro."

The problems of Jewish life as recounted in this book of Numbers – the baseless rumblings and grumblings, the episode of the spies,

Korah's rebellion, and so on – all this highlights and evaluates the often questionable behavior of the people and of their leadership during those crises from the inside – that is, from the Jewish point of view. But as seen from the outside, by the peoples of the world even then, and by all future generations, it was unquestionably an era of triumphant development and advancement for the Jewish nation. The inclusion of Balaam's prophecies in the Torah is intended to spotlight the high level of Israel's achievements, and to emphasize that in spite of all their failings, God will never abandon the Jewish people.

(We note in passing that the same disparity between "serious issues when viewed from the inside" and "enormous achievements when viewed from the outside" is characteristic of other eras in the history of the Jewish people as well, and, in particular, in the modern State of Israel.)

It is interesting to note too that fairly recent archeological finds confirm the historicity of a prophet named "Balaam son of Beor." In 1967, a Dutch archaeological expedition doing excavations at Deir Alla in the Transjordan region (five miles – 8 km – northeast of the point where the Jabbok River flows into the Jordan) found an altar, on whose walls were inscribed references to "Balaam, the son of Beor, the seer of God" and to his prophecies. That inscription dates back only to the eighth century BCE, much later than the events that the Torah describes in this Torah portion, but perhaps it reflects a much older tradition.

## § 20.2. BALAAM: PROPHETIC GENIUS, INCOMPARABLE VILLAIN

To the sages of the Talmud, Balaam is a true villain; even his name Balaam is interpreted as *bole'a 'am*, "devourer of nations." That is, Balaam is, prepared to destroy everyone indiscriminately. Tractate Avot of the Mishnah (5:19) informs us that Balaam's most salient qualities are "an evil eye, arrogance, and greed."

Seen in that light, Balaam is often perceived as vile, mercenary, and hopelessly unprincipled, prepared to perpetrate any villainy for the sake of material gain.

It should be noted, however, that the Torah speaks of Balaam's wickedness only later, in retrospect (Num. 31:16 and Deut. 23:6). But in the narrative of this portion, it would seem, Balaam demonstrates no villainy, but on the contrary, he insists again and again that he is prepared to do only that which God instructs him to do.

Why should such an individual be deemed a villain? And moreover: Jewish tradition states that Balaam was actually an eminent prophet, comparable in his prophetic abilities even to Moses himself! It is not entirely clear how we are to reconcile these two apparently conflicting assessments of Balaam son of Beor.

\* \* \*

We note first of all that Balaam's religious convictions are clearly aligned with those of the Jews. He mentions exclusively the Hebrew names of God (*Y-H-W-H* and *Shaddai*, see Num. 24:4). Thus, he acts in accordance with Jewish religious tradition. Not only does he not oppose the Almighty, but he consistently and repeatedly emphasizes that he will say only what God directs him to say.

The Torah tells us nothing of Balaam's genealogy, but only that he comes from the city of Pethor, on the Euphrates River, and that his kinsfolk live there (Num. 22:5). In this connection, the Midrash therefore believes that Balaam was a descendant of Laban; that is, he belonged to the Nahor branch of the Terah clan (Terah was Abraham's father). That family was always associated with a monotheistic tradition, and all the Matriarchs of the Jewish people – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah – were scions of that family.

And yet, Balaam, as an individual of monotheistic and, as it were, "partly Jewish" origins had fully integrated himself into the larger idolatrous world, in which he was recognized and respected. Apparently, the entire Nahor line was a line of "moderate monotheists, who were tolerant of idolatry." That is, they did not insist on the exclusivity

of monotheism, and they oppose neither idol worship itself nor the norms of morality (or immorality, as the case may be) that typically accompany idolatrous practices.

By contrast, Abraham and the entire line of Israel indeed insisted on the exclusivity of monotheism. Abraham was a destroyer of idols; Shem, Eber, and Nahor were not. It is precisely because the people of Israel asserted their exclusivity, and openly proclaimed their goal of changing the entire world, that they became an object of dread to Moab (Num. 22:2).

Thus, it is not monotheism *per se* that is critical here, but the Torah's ethical monotheism – that is, the goal of influencing all of mankind to adopt the worldview of Abraham and Moses, and thus to completely defeat the practice of idolatry. But Balaam's monotheism does not meet this standard. It is “extra-ethical,” and therefore false.

The spiritual confrontation between the Jews and the peoples of the world, which is the focus of this weekly portion, is presented to us here such that Balak is calling on the “moderate monotheist” Balaam to oppose the “radical monotheism” of Israel.

\* \* \*

At the onset of the story Balaam receives prophetic visions in a dream. This type of prophecy was apparently the norm for Balaam (he tells Balak's emissaries, the Moabite dignitaries, “Spend the night here, and I shall reply to you as the Lord may instruct me.” See Num. 22:8). But in a waking state Balaam can receive prophecy only concerning the Jewish people.

Prophesying in a dream is not a particularly exalted level of prophecy from the Torah's point of view. For example, God appeared to Abimelech “in a dream by night” (Gen. 20:3). And so to Laban “in a dream by night” (Gen. 31:24). Likewise, we will soon read the Torah's description of the incident involving the angel, Balaam, and Balaam's ass. The Torah says there: “Then the Lord uncovered Balaam's eyes” (Num. 22:31). This too speaks of a low level of Divine revelation. We saw it also concerning Hagar: “Then God opened her eyes, and she

saw a well of water” (Gen. 21:19). And again with Elisha’s attendant: “Then Elisha prayed: ‘Lord, open his eyes and let him see.’ And the Lord opened the servant’s eyes and he saw the hills all around Elisha covered with horses and chariots of fire” (2 Kings 2:16).

But at the same time, in certain technical aspects of prophecy Balaam demonstrates unsurpassed mastery. His prophecies gaze far into the future and offer a profoundly detailed description of the events that he envisions taking place.

Balaam’s problem is that he views his prophetic skill as a merely a handicraft of sorts. He fails to perceive the responsibility that his superpowers impose on him. We often see it even today: As accomplished as a specialist may be, his expertise is often still very one-sided.

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As noted above, Jewish tradition enumerates Balaam’s most prominent personal characteristic as “an evil eye, arrogance, and greed.” But these traits are not as straightforward as they might seem at first. Let us have a look at them more closely.

An “evil eye,” *ayin ra’ah*, is the tendency to find flaws in everything. Because it is rare for any person or society to be completely good or completely bad, the attitude and outlook we adopt when evaluating other people is important.

A person who tries to see the merits of others is said to have “a benevolent eye,” while one who focuses on other people’s flaws has an “evil eye.” And that is precisely the underlying mechanism that gives a curse its power, because the efficacy of a curse consists in absolutizing the negative aspects of the person or thing being cursed. In terms of Jewish tradition, we can express this as the ability to choose God’s moment of wrath, and to direct that anger in the desired direction.

But this trait is found not only in villains. Or, more precisely, the presence of this trait does not alone make a person a villain. This property is sometimes characteristic of even righteous individuals –

those of the *Gevurah*, “power, might,” attribute, who see in others mainly their shortcomings, not their virtues.<sup>68</sup>

Balaam’s second character trait is *ruach gevohah*, “arrogance,” which manifests itself immediately in how he communicates with Balak. And yet, this property cannot be considered entirely negative. For as we know, in order to achieve success and self-realization it is essential that a person not underestimate himself. In Balaam’s case, we can see that his high opinion of himself was not exaggerated, but in fact quite realistic.

And finally, the third of Balaam’s three negative qualities as enumerated by the sages is *nefesh rechavah*, “greed.” But neither is this trait inherently negative. The intended meaning is not necessarily greed in the material sense, for it can also mean “spiritual greed,” as we shall explain below.

When Balak’s messengers come to call on Balaam, he tells them: “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Lord my God” (Num. 22:18). These words are often understood as hinting at quite the opposite of what Balaam seems to be saying. I.e., that Balaam does actually wish to receive from Balak, as payment for his services, a house full of silver and gold. But to suggest that Balaam would entertain such a petty attitude is rather inconsistent with his status as one of the greatest of all prophets. Moreover, even after Balaam has demonstrated multiple times that he is unable to achieve the desired result, he repeats the very same formulation (Num. 24:13). At that point it is no longer possible to understand it as a demand from Balak for more generous compensation. Apparently then, Balaam’s motives are entirely different. He has no use for any more gold and silver. (He is wealthy enough already.) The essence of his “greed” is his keen ambition to exert his influence upon the world.

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<sup>68</sup> In the *Bible Dynamics* commentary on Genesis, in the chapters relating to Abraham and Isaac, we have discussed in detail the concepts of righteousness of *chesed*, “kindness,” vs. righteousness of *gevurah*, “might.”

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As a general rule, the primary passion of any exceptional individual of immense knowledge and personal potential is a passion to influence the world. The higher a person stands, and the further he is able to see – of which Balaam is a prime example – the more convinced he feels that he can change the world. And his passion drives him to do exactly that. A desire to make a significant contribution to the universe is one of the most compelling passions that a high-caliber individual will experience.

When the Moabite messengers arrive, and in Balak's name urge Balaam to curse Israel, there is nothing to suggest that Balaam is really all that eager to follow along. But he longs to play a part in the monumental events unfolding around him. Even so, he will not contravene the Almighty's instructions, and initially he intends to do only that which God will tell him – neither more nor less. Balaam's desire to participate, and not to remain on the sidelines, is in fact his desire to hear the Divine word. No, we cannot call this a lust for power. It is Balaam's desire to exert his influence on the universe.

It should be noted that this passion to influence the universe is itself a decidedly positive thing, for it is the force behind every creative impulse, and of every desire to engage in science and art, politics and business. This passion becomes a problem only when it loses its ability to discriminate, and the person held tight in its grip is prepared to follow his passion wherever it may lead, even to the most ignoble ends – to vile acts and shady dealings. In just this way, such passion has destroyed the lives of many talented people who went on to serve communism, Nazism, and various other villainous regimes.

Reining in such passion therefore becomes a moral imperative. For any genius, refusal to participate in evil ventures, and insistence on disavowal of all villainy as incompatible with his essential self, are formidable tests. But Balaam cannot meet that challenge. He is enslaved to his passions to such a degree that he completely loses his orientation.

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Balaam's willingness to curse an entire nation is usually seen as clear evidence of his "evil nature." But here too the situation is not nearly as simple as it might seem.

Warring among nations, with the total annihilation of the losing side, was the norm in that era. It would be anachronistically inappropriate for us to apply to them the morals that we take for granted today. Formally speaking, then, and when seen in this light, Balaam's behavior is not really all that evil.

Let us imagine that delegates from a respected people of a certain region come to a prophet with an international reputation and the ability to influence the outcome. They inform him that a new tribe of nomads has appeared on the scene, who threaten their stability, and even their very existence. And they ask for his help. What could be more natural than for that prophet to agree to help them? Moreover, Balaam insists again and again that he can do only what the Almighty allows him to do. What is it, then, that makes Balaam's actions so intrinsically evil?

Balaam's wish to accept Balak's invitation, and his repeated appeals to God with one and the same request despite the initial prohibition, are usually perceived as demonstrating that Balaam himself genuinely wishes to curse Israel, and he is therefore trying to find some loophole that will allow him to do so. It is assumed that if he were a good person, he would understand from the get-go that the Almighty disapproves of the whole sordid affair. But is this enough to accuse Balaam of villainy?

In fact, there are often situations in life when God tests our strength. When we see that our deeds fail to yield the desired result, this does not always mean that they are displeasing to the Almighty.

In the incident of the golden calf, for example, God says to Moses: "Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation" (Exod. 32:10). But when Moses nonetheless persists in seeking forgiveness for the Jewish people, we understand intuitively that Moses is doing the right thing.

And we even see his refusal to retreat at the first failure as evidence of his true greatness.

Why, then, do the sages maintain so emphatically that Balaam's behavior was villainous right out of the gate?

Balaam's main fault, it would seem, was that a prophet of his stature should not have viewed the situation so narrowly, as just an ordinary interethnic conflict. He should have understood who the people of Israel were and what their destiny was.

When sending for Balaam, Balak says: "There is a people that came out of Egypt; it hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me. Come then, put a curse upon this people for me ... perhaps I can thus defeat them and drive them out of the land" (Num. 22:5). This reflects an exclusively military-political understanding of the situation. A new player has emerged on the local stage, demanding a share of the resources, and it is justifiable that the old guard want to expel him. Balak, a political leader, is driven by the exigencies of realpolitik. For a king, this approach is quite normal.

But for Balaam, this level of understanding is unacceptable. Balaam is a first-rate prophet, with a clear sense of the course that history will take for centuries to come. He also has exhaustive knowledge of who the Patriarchs were, and of Israel's origins. For Balaam to adopt such a "petty-pragmatic" approach is therefore already a form of villainy, because from a person of his stature the demands are much higher.

When God asks Balaam, "What do these people want of you?" (Num. 22:9) this is meant not merely rhetorically; it is a question of how Balaam understands the situation. And when Balaam in his answer essentially just repeats Balak's words, thus confirming that he prefers to remain at the military-political level, his actions are a crime from that moment on. Note that in the end, Balak is not punished. Only Balaam is executed (Num. 31:8), because Balak's actions are appropriate to his level, but Balaam's are not.

We cannot correctly assess a situation when we judge it only locally, considering only "the current state of affairs." To arrive at the correct assessment of a given situation one needs to perceive it in its full

context, considering the entire background. Balaam's unwillingness to grasp the full essence of the problem is unacceptable, and it is this behavior that is deemed villainous.

\* \* \*

But how could Balaam fail to understand the Almighty's direct involvement in the destiny of the Jewish people? Did he not see the miracles that God had performed for them – the Exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, and so on?

Balaam knew all of this, of course. All the surrounding nations knew about the miracles of the Exodus.

(This is obvious from Rahab's words to the two spies sent by Joshua: "She said to the men, 'I know that the Lord has given the country to you, because dread of you has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, whom you doomed. When we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you; for the Lord your God is the only God in heaven above and on earth below.'" See Josh. 2:9-11.)

Balaam, however, has no interest in such "details." He does not read the map of reality. Balaam's approach is spiritualistic; he focuses only on what is given to him from Above, which is a major drawback, because, after all, the Divine will is revealed in ongoing developments here on earth no less than in the heavenly realm.

But Balaam fails to perceive the world around him as a source of Divine manifestation. He believes that in the material world everything happens by chance – even one's connection with God. When Balaam tells Balak: "Perhaps the Lord will grant me a manifestation" (Num. 23:3), he expresses it as *ulai yikkareh*, "perhaps I will experience a chance encounter" with the Lord.

Balaam is therefore unaware of the signs that reality sends his way – in this episode, most notably, through his talking ass. (An “ass,” *chamor*, is closely related to *chomer*, “materiality, reality.”<sup>69</sup>)

That is, Balaam is unaware of all this until the angel reveals it to him directly. And likewise, Balaam does not understand that the Jewish people are specially blessed, until God informs him of that.

### § 20.3. WHO IS REALLY IN CHARGE OF BLESSING AND CURSING

There is a striking contrast between Balaam's special powers and a certain notable characteristic of the Jewish people. Balaam's greatest strength is his ability to bestow blessings and curses and make them stick: “For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed” (Num. 22:6).

But when defining a similar characteristic of the Jewish people, the Almighty phrases it in a markedly different formulation: “I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you” (Gen. 12:3, 27:29), and also later in the words of Balaam himself to Israel: “Blessed are they who bless you, accursed they who curse you!” (Num. 24:9).

The point here is that the Jewish people do not themselves bless or curse others. Rather, they are what we might call a “mirror people”: when others curse or bless the Jews, their wishes bounce back on them like a boomerang. People and nations bring blessings or curses upon themselves according to their attitude toward the Jews.

Balaam believes that it is in his power to bless or curse. This belief corrupts him and those who rely on him for the result they seek. To their thinking, what counts most in life is one's ability to wield magical powers. Virtuous behavior is to them of little or no importance.

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<sup>69</sup> Precisely speaking, Balaam's ass in the Hebrew is an *aton*, a “female ass,” rather than *chamor*, a “male ass.” Nevertheless, the general association with the concept of *chomer*, “materiality,” is preserved.

Abraham – and his descendants, the Jewish people – actively confer no blessings of their own. They only bring such blessings into the world. The Jewish people advance mankind and human causes primarily by their example. They have no actual power over others, except the power to help those people and nations who sincerely wish to advance.

#### § 20.4. THE ESSENCE OF THE “CURSE” CONCEPT

When Balak calls on Balaam to curse the Jewish people, he does so not secretly, but as publicly as possible: all the dignitaries of Moab are standing by to hear his words (Num. 23:6).

This shows that the concept of a curse exists on two distinct levels. The first of those is mystical: The effect of the curse occurs by Divine command. The second is a socio-psychological effect, whose influence on others happens through the public consciousness.

We ought not see these two levels of curse as mutually exclusive; rather, these two are interconnected, and they act in unison: a Divine command is set in motion through the agency of social consciousness. Needless to say, any blessing or curse is activated from Above. But its efficacy is the direct result of the fact that people believe in it – which manifests at both the individual and societal levels.

(Note, too, that the same mechanism operates with respect to dreams. Jewish tradition states that a dream is realized according to how it is interpreted. In other words, it is not the dream itself that brings the result, but the interpretation given to it, i.e., the manner and extent of the dreamer’s belief in his own dream.)

When a curse finds its way into the public consciousness, it creates a “mindset of destruction” for the person or persons who have been cursed. They begin to act in accordance with that attitude, and the curse then becomes a “self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Divine direction acts through social engineering, introducing certain attitudes into society, while preventing others from taking hold. In particular, no prophet can introduce into the public consciousness any given attitude simply at will. Rather, that attitude must have a

deep and well-developed foundation, backed by enormous energy. We express that idea with the formulation: "Heaven agrees and approves of this."

\* \* \*

As already noted, the classical basis for a curse, that is, the mechanism for creating a "curse mindset" in society, is by inflating shortcomings while silencing merits in the object of the curse. This attitude towards others is the "evil eye," which is Balaam's most important skill as a specialist in curses. Balaam knows how to exploit the defects and vulnerabilities in every person, community, society, or nation. We describe this as "finding the moment of God's wrath and directing that anger in the desired direction."

By highlighting those negative aspects, Balaam and professionals like him can turn a normal, average individual or society, neither the best nor the worst, into an evildoer of global proportions, the villain from hell, in the eyes of his close associates, and of the world.

It should be noted that television and the press often employ precisely that same technique. They conceal the merits and, inflate the defects of their target, creating a "curse mindset" and directing the "popular anger" toward it. The voice of the people is then perceived as the voice of God – *Vox populi, vox Dei*.

## § 20.5. JEWISH IMMUNITY TO CURSES

The Jewish people enjoy a special immunity to curses. Any attempt to curse them is futile, because God has established that the Jewish people will always be a blessed people.

There is an important reason for that. The Jewish people exist not for their own sake, but as an instrument for transmitting Divine light to humanity. Therefore, the Almighty cannot allow the destruction of such a people. The global mission of the Jewish people fundamentally incorporates a "blessing mindset." That is, the faults or shortcomings of any particular Jew or segment of the Jewish people must not be

allowed to hinder the Jewish mission, which is what a curse on the entire people would attempt to do.

This fundamental blessing that God has bestowed upon Israel has a uniquely positive significance in history. In Balaam's era that blessing existed only as a potential, but that Divine, inexorable Jewish blessing is in our times visibly expressed in the historical legacy accumulated by the Jewish people, in their historic contribution to the building of civilization, as rooted in the consciousness of mankind.

All this yet more effectively frustrates any attempt to curse the Jewish people. Although the enemies of the Jews sometimes succeed at wreaking damage upon the Jewish people, in the end the lasting effect is that the fundamental, Divine Jewish blessing becomes only that much stronger.

The Balaam episode, which became widely known in the region, was a material factor in the conquest of Canaan, because the psychological breakdown of the land's prior inhabitants was an important element in Israel's success. Seeing the utter impossibility of cursing the Jewish people had precisely that psychological effect on the Canaanite population.

#### § 20.6. HOW BALAK AND BALAAM'S APPROACHES DIFFER

In the process of their attempt to curse the Jewish people, we see a significant difference between the positions of Balak and Balaam.

Balak, the idolater king, believes that political aspirations are enough to achieve anything. He cannot see (does not want to see) that God will not allow Israel to be cursed, and he loses all patience with Balaam for "not delivering the goods." He also transmits this same attitude to his entire entourage. The messengers he sends to Balaam avoid reporting back to Balak the reality, that Balaam refuses to go because the Almighty forbids it, for they know that such concepts do not even exist in Balak's worldview.

Even when Balaam himself explains to Balak that it was God who forbade him to curse the Jews, Balak simply ignores Balaam's words,

believing that he only needs to try harder, to organize the curse more correctly.

From an idolater's point of view there is no Higher Will, no universal attitude of ethics and purpose, but only the laws of a functioning world. (We note in passing that the worldview of the modern-day materialists is essentially analogous.) And although these laws cannot be circumvented, you can always find a way to direct them towards achieving your own goals.

Just as you cannot reach the moon by jumping, no matter how high you can jump. But if you can build a spaceship with a powerful enough engine, a flight to the moon becomes feasible.

On the other hand, Balaam, the monotheist prophet, conducts himself quite differently. He understands that there is a universal goal set from Above, which is sure to be realized. There are various options for how to conform with that plan, but Balaam knows that it is impossible to bypass it entirely. And therefore Balaam, unlike Balak, understands after his second attempt that the curse cannot be achieved, and he abandons the undertaking.

We can say that all monotheists share at least some minimal common ground. That is, even if some monotheists still relate to us with hostility, they nevertheless share with us a basic approach to how we see the world. And therefore, in a critical situation and under pressure from Above, their views can change from hostile to supportive.

#### § 20.7. A CRISIS IN MOAB (22:2-4)

ב וַיֵּרָא בָלָק בֶּן־צִפּוֹר אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֹמְרֵי: ג וַיִּגַּר מוֹאָב  
 מִפְּנֵי הָעָם מְאֹד כִּי רַב־הוּא וַיִּקְזַן מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ד וַיֹּאמֶר  
 מוֹאָב אֶל־זִקְנֵי מְדִיָּן עֲתִידָה יִלְחָכּוּ הַקָּהָל אֶת־כָּל־סִבְיַתֵּינוּ כְּלַחֲדָ  
 הַשּׁוֹר אֶת יֵרֶק הַשָּׂדֶה וּבָלָק בֶּן־צִפּוֹר מִלֶּדָה לְמוֹאָב בָּעֵת הַהוּא:

(2) Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.

**(3) Moab was alarmed because that people was so numerous. Moab dreaded the Israelites,**

**(4) and Moab said to the elders of Midian, “Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field.” Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time,**

**(2) Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites:** When Balak saw that two powerful local kingdoms, Sihon and Og, had been defeated, he realized that the balance of power in the region had changed. Although Israel did not pose an immediate physical threat to Moab, Balak could not continue to live as before, since the ideology that Israel espoused was markedly different from that of the peoples of the world. Balak therefore decided to strike a blow at the Jewish people by taking a cue from within the framework of their own ideology – by using words.

**(3) Moab was alarmed because that people was so numerous. Moab dreaded the Israelites:** An alternate translation of *va-yakotz* would be “was disgusted,” i.e., Moab loathed the Israelites. (Cf. Num. 21:5, where *katzah*, which derives from the very same Hebrew root, was translated as loathing: “We have come to loathe this miserable food.”)

There are two aspects here: first, Moab was “alarmed” by Israel’s military power. And moreover, Moab found Israel repugnant. That is, living in close proximity to Israel became ideologically unbearable. Note that until Israel demonstrated its prowess in the military-political arena, the Jewish ideology was not interesting to anyone. But as soon as they achieved military victories, immediately their ideas became important. As long as you are poor, no one cares what you think. But if you become successful, your ideas suddenly deserve attention.

It thus becomes clear that if Israel is to exert a spiritual influence on the world, military victories are an absolute necessity. Material conquest must precede spiritual influence. And therefore, first Israel’s battles were recounted, in the *Chukkat* portion. And only after that, in this portion, *Balak*, their spiritual conflict with the nations is addressed.

**Moab dreaded the Israelites:** Moab is aware that Israel might conquer them; however, most importantly, they just find it simply unbearable to live next to the Jewish nation. The Jews carry within themselves such a potent spiritual charge that it is impossible to live next to them while continuing in the same old ways. Moab therefore hits upon the idea of uniting with their neighbors who, like them, want to retain their old ways. Through this union they hope to neutralize the Jewish influence.

**(4) And Moab said to the elders of Midian:** Throughout the episode, Moab and Midian are intertwined. They work together. Since there is an opinion in the Tradition that Balak, the king of Moab, was himself a Midianite by birth, this may indicate the existence of a “Midianite empire,” of which Moab was one dependent part. And Balak therefore consults with the elders of Midian.

We will see a little later that the Moabites operate primarily at the level of “mass appeal,” and the Midianites at the level of leadership. Specifically, the Israelite commoners are seduced by the daughters of Moab (Num. 25:1). But the daughter of a Midianite king enters into an intimate relationship with Zimri, a chieftain of the tribe of Simon (Num. 25:6).

**“Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field”:** Although this people is causing us no direct harm, they are transforming the lives of everyone in the vicinity – “licking clean all that is about us.” To coexist with them is therefore simply impossible.

**(4-5) Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time sent messengers:** The words “at that time” seem superfluous. The Midrash explains that this was an unusual situation at critical time. Balak himself was not actually a Moabite, but a Midianite prince who had only recently become the ruler of Moab. As a new leader, he was inexperienced and panic-stricken.

**And Moab said to the elders of Midian:** Balak addresses the Midianites not only because they are his people, but because he considers them experts in the ideological struggle against Israel.

Moses had spent many years (even decades) in Midian. He married the daughter of a Midianite priest, Jethro, and their children were born there. At first Moses did not want to leave Midian at all, even when God informed him that it was his mission to return to Egypt and lead the Exodus. All this was apparently not accidental.<sup>70</sup> (For further discussion of this topic see § 22.1 below.)

### § 20.8. BALAK SENDS MESSENGERS TO BALAAM (22:5-20)

ה וישלח מלאכים אל-בלעם בן-בער פתורה אשר על-הנהר ארץ  
 בני-עמו לקרא-לו לאמר הנה עם יצא ממצרים הנה כסה את-עין  
 הארץ והוא ישב ממלי: וועתה לכה-נא ארה-לי את-העם הזה כי-  
 עצום הוא ממני אולי אוכל נכה-בו ואגרושנו מן-הארץ כי ידעתי את  
 אשר-תברך מברך ואשר תאר יואר: וילכו זקני מואב וזקני מדן  
 וקסמים בידם ויבאו אל-בלעם וידברו אליו דברי בלק: ה ויאמר  
 אליהם לינו פה הלילה והשבתי אתכם דבר באשר ידבר יי אלי וישבו  
 שרי-מואב עם-בלעם: ט ויבא אלהים אל-בלעם ויאמר מי האנשים  
 האלה עמך: י ויאמר בלעם אל-האלהים בלק בן-צפר מלך מואב  
 שלח אלי: יא הנה העם היצא ממצרים ויבס את-עין הארץ עתה לכה  
 קבה-לי אתו אולי אוכל להלחם בו וגרשתיו: יב ויאמר אלהים אל-  
 בלעם לא תלך עמם לא תאר את-העם כי ברוד הוא: יג ויקם בלעם  
 בבקר ויאמר אל-שרי בלק לכו אל-ארצכם כי מאן יי לתתי להלך  
 עמכם: יד ויקומו שרי מואב ויבאו אל-בלק ויאמרו מאן בלעם הלך  
 עמנו: טו ויסף עוד בלק שלח שרים רבים ונכבדים מאלה: טז ויבאו  
 אל-בלעם ויאמרו לו כה אמר בלק בן-צפור אל-נא תמנע מהלך  
 אלי: יז כי-כבד אכבדך מאד וכל אשר-תאמר אלי אעשה ולכה-נא  
 קבה-לי את העם הזה: יח ויען בלעם ויאמר אל-עבדי בלק אם-יתן  
 לי בלק מלא ביתו כסף וזהב לא אוכל לעבל את-פי יי אלהי לעשות  
 קטנה או גדולה: יט ועתה שבו נא בזה גס-אתם הלילה ואדעה מה-  
 יסף יי דבר עמי: כ ויבא אלהים אל-בלעם לילה ויאמר לו אם-לקרא  
 לך באו האנשים קום לך אתם ואך את-הדבר אשר-אדבר אליך  
 אתו תעשה:

<sup>70</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on Exod. 3:11.

(5) sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor in Pethor, which is by the Euphrates, in the land of his kinsfolk, to invite him, saying, "There is a people that came out of Egypt; it hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me.

(6) Come then, put a curse upon this people for me, since they are too numerous for me; perhaps I can thus defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed."

(7) The elders of Moab and the elders of Midian, versed in divination, set out. They came to Balaam and gave him Balak's message.

(8) He said to them, "Spend the night here, and I shall reply to you as the Lord may instruct me." So the Moabite dignitaries stayed with Balaam.

(9) God came to Balaam and said, "What do these people want of you?"

(10) Balaam said to God, "Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message:

(11) Here is a people that came out from Egypt and hides the earth from view. Come now and curse them for me; perhaps I can engage them in battle and drive them off."

(12) But God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed."

(13) Balaam arose in the morning and said to Balak's dignitaries, "Go back to your own country, for the Lord will not let me go with you."

(14) The Moabite dignitaries left, and they came to Balak and said, "Balaam refused to come with us."

(15) Then Balak sent other dignitaries, more numerous and distinguished than the first.

(16) They came to Balaam and said to him, "Thus says Balak son of Zippor: Please do not refuse to come to me.

(17) **I will reward you richly and I will do anything you ask of me. Only come and damn this people for me.”**

(18) **Balaam replied to Balak’s officials, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Lord my God.**

(19) **So you, too, stay here overnight, and let me find out what else the Lord may say to me.”**

(20) **That night God came to Balaam and said to him, “If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do.”**

**(5) Sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor in Pethor, which is by the Euphrates, in the land of his kinsfolk:** “Pethor, a city beyond the Euphrates in Mesopotamia, is where the Nahor family lived.

**It hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me:** This nation has hidden the earth from view. It has already eclipsed – and now threatens to destroy – our entire lifestyle. As this problem equally affects us all, it behooves you to come and help.

**(6) Come then, put a curse upon this people:** Note that Balak asks Balaam to come and put a curse. Working the curse from afar would not be sufficient. All of Moab, the people and the state, must be involved in this action. As explained earlier, a curse is not just a magical procedure, but a socio-mystical action that affects the world and its inhabitants through public awareness.

**For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed:** It was well known that Balaam had superior ability to achieve results by influencing societies and manipulating the public consciousness.

**(7) The elders of Moab and the elders of Midian, versed in divination, set out:** Literally, “with witchcraft in their hand, they set out.” This can mean that they carried with them the rewards to Balaam of the witchcraft that he would perform. Or it is saying that these elders were themselves experts in the field. As they were Balaam’s professional colleagues, it would be more difficult for him to refuse their request.

**(8) He said to them, “Spend the night here, and I shall reply to you as the Lord may instruct me”:** The prophetic spirit normally rests on Balaam at night. As explained earlier, this indicates a relatively low level of prophecy.

**“I shall reply to you as the Lord may instruct me”:** Here “the Lord” is written in the Hebrew as *YHWH*. Balaam calls on the Almighty using His four-letter name – the Tetragrammaton. That is, his religious views are aligned with the traditions of the Terah family (Terah was Nahor’s son and Abraham’s father, see Gen. 11:27).

**(9) God came to Balaam and said, “What do these people want of you?”:** Literally, “Who are these men who are with you?” This is the same kind of question that God posed to Adam after he and Eve had eaten of the forbidden fruit: “The Lord God called out to Adam and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” (Gen. 3:9). And likewise to Cain, after he had murdered his brother Abel: “The Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’” (Gen. 4:9).

Clearly, God does not ask such a question because He Himself does not know the answer. Rather, these questions challenge the person so asked to contemplate a weighty problem or situation of the moment. As noted earlier, it would be wrong to understand such questions as rhetorical, as simply a conversation opener. Each of these questions is posed as a test of how the person perceives reality. Like Adam’s and Cain’s responses, Balaam’s reply here reflects his deluded worldview, revealing his defective understanding of what is actually happening.

**(10-11) Balaam said to God, “Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message:** Here is a people that came out from Egypt and hides the earth from view. Come now and curse them for me; perhaps I can engage them in battle and drive them off”:

Balaam fails God’s test. His response to the question exactly echoes Balak’s words to him. But, as explained earlier, that level of analysis of the situation is acceptable for Balak, but not for Balaam.

**(12) But God said to Balaam, “Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed”:** The Almighty instructs Balaam on how he is to act, and also corrects his understanding of the situation. The Jewish people cannot be cursed, but not because they have no shortcomings that can be exaggerated or inflated (which is

how cursing works). Rather, it is because the Jewish people, from their very earliest origins beginning with Abraham (Gen. 12:3) have always been blessed.

**(14) The Moabite dignitaries left, and they came to Balak and said, “Balaam refused to come with us”:** They fail to mention that Balaam would not go because God would not allow it. Balak, acting on incomplete information, therefore decides that a more generous inducement will fix the problem.

**(19) So you, too, stay here overnight, and let me find out what else the Lord may say to me”:** Balaam asks God for permission, and it is granted. As the Midrash says: “Heaven leads a person in the direction that he wishes to be led.”

**(20) That night God came to Balaam and said to him, “If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do”:** This time the Almighty has no questions for Balaam, but immediately instructs him on how he should proceed.

On the surface then, the negotiations over Balaam’s second request seem much shorter than they were the first time. However, according to the approach that we shall propose below, the incident of Balaam’s ass will reveal in greater detail the nature of this prophecy that Balaam received on the second night.

#### § 20.9. THE INCIDENT OF THE ASS: DREAM OR REALITY?

The episode of Balaam’s ass, as narrated by the Torah here, is renowned for its descriptive color. To understand it literally, however, is quite problematic.

This problem, of course, is not merely that an ass speaks. Such supernatural occurrences are not uncommon in the Tanakh. But what is more noteworthy is that when the ass begins to speak, Balaam evinces no surprise whatsoever.

When the Torah says, “The Lord opened the ass’s mouth,” this clearly indicates that it was an unexpected, miraculous event that had

never happened before. While miracles do occur in Tanakh, such an event is by far not the norm, and should be expected to provoke wonder.

Moreover, the ass episode seems to add nothing new to the main narrative, and is more like a tangential sub-plot. It ends with the words: "But the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, 'Go with the men. But you must say nothing except what I tell you.' So Balaam went on with Balak's dignitaries" (Num. 22:35).

This phrasing is quite close to that of the previous encounter that we have just seen: "That night God came to Balaam and said to him, 'If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do.' When he arose in the morning, Balaam saddled his ass and departed with the Moabite dignitaries" (Num. 22:20-21). Thus we see that the incident of the ass has not materially changed the situation.

It is also strange that the dignitaries of Moab, who are along with Balaam on the journey, are completely absent from the story of the ass. All this would seem to suggest that the episode of the ass is removed from actual physical reality. It is separate from the main plot, and not really needed by it. In consideration of all of the above, we see that we have two options for understanding this story.

The first approach is to see the story as a dream experienced by Balaam. In other words, it is an elaboration of the prophecy that Balaam received when Balak's messengers came to him the second time. With this understanding, that it is only a dream, it is reasonable that Balaam shows no surprise when the ass begins to speak, and only enters into calm but pointed deliberation with it.

The second approach is to assume that all these events did happen to Balaam in a vision that he had in the course of his journey, in order to make clear to him what would happen if he were to follow through on his attempt to curse Israel.

Both of those approaches reveal the mechanism at work when the Almighty enters into dialogue with a human being. The key point is that besides dutifully executing God's immediate instructions, it is no less essential to grasp the underlying meaning of His message, which,

although often not as obvious, demands the same level of attention nonetheless.

Seen in this light, the story of Balaam and the ass recapitulates the overall plot in miniature.

As the ass transports Balaam, so is Balaam himself in the larger context just an “ass” to Balak, as reflected in Balaam’s behavior. Balak hires Balaam to curse the Jewish people, and Balaam proceeds to fulfill the order. But as things develop, an angel wielding a sword blocks the road, which means that God will not allow the Jews to be cursed.

Balaam’s solution is to do exactly what the ass does – he detours off the straight and narrow, attempting to find a bypass. But Balak is still urging him on, so Balaam tries to escape, in the process pressing Balak against the wall, as it were. And finally, when passage becomes completely impossible, Balaam, like the ass, just “lies down,” refusing to proceed.

Ultimately, Balaam will himself become the “talking ass,” whose mission it is to open the eyes of the nations of the world, so that they too will see the angel wielding a sword. That is, to demonstrate to the world that everything that happens to the Jewish people happens not by mere happenstance, but under God’s careful direction.

For Balaam, the story of the ass is a kind of educational allegory, teaching him how to behave properly at a critical moment. The lesson is, that when we find it impossible to move forward, even after repeated attempts, we should understand that this is no mere accident, but a sign from Above. Instead of simply trying to proceed in any manner possible, we should, at very least, stop to rethink the entire situation.

When later Balaam fails twice to curse the Jewish people, both times pronouncing, against his own will, not curses but blessings, he will finally, in the third installment, bless Israel of his own accord, and ultimately merit proclaiming a glorious prophecy that gazes many millennia into the future.

It was for the sake of that independent prophecy, which Balaam will declare in defiance of Balak’s request, that Balaam needed to be taught the lesson of the ass.

## § 20.10. BALAAM'S ASS (22:21-35)

כא וַיָּקָם בַּלְעָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחְבֵּשׁ אֶת־אֲתָנֹו וַיִּלְדָּד עִם־שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב׃ כב וַיַּחֲרֹ־  
 אֶף אֱלֹהִים כִּי־הוֹלִךְ הוּא וַיַּחְיִצֵּב מִלֶּאֲדָי יַי בַּדֶּרֶךְ לְשֹׁטֹן לֹו וְהוּא רֹכֵב  
 עַל־אֲתָנֹו וּשְׁנֵי נַעֲרָיו עִמּוֹ׃ כג וַתֵּרָא הָאֲתָנֹן אֶת־מִלְאָדָי יַי נֹצֵב בַּדֶּרֶךְ  
 וַחֲרָבוּ שְׁלוֹפָה בִּידֹו וַתַּט הָאֲתָנֹן מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ וַתִּלְדָּד בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיָּד בַּלְעָם  
 אֶת־הָאֲתָנֹן לְהַטִּיחָה הַדֶּרֶךְ׃ כד וַיַּעֲמֵד מִלֶּאֲדָי יַי בְּמִשְׁעוֹל הַכְּרָמִים  
 גָּדַר מְזֶה וְגָדַר מְזֶה׃ כה וַתֵּרָא הָאֲתָנֹן אֶת־מִלְאָדָי יַי וַתִּחְלַץ אֶל־הַקִּיר  
 וַתִּלְחָץ אֶת־רִגְלָהּ בַּלְעָם אֶל־הַקִּיר וַיִּסֹּף לְהַכְתִּיחָה׃ כו וַיִּזְסַף מִלֶּאֲדָי־יַי  
 עָבֹור וַיַּעֲמֵד בְּמָקוֹם צָר אֲשֶׁר אֵין־דֶּרֶךְ לְנִטּוֹת יָמִין וּשְׂמֹאל׃ כז וַתֵּרָא  
 הָאֲתָנֹן אֶת־מִלְאָדָי יַי וַתִּרְבֵּץ תַּחַת בַּלְעָם וַיַּחֲרֹ־אֶף בַּלְעָם וַיָּד אֶת־  
 הָאֲתָנֹן בְּמָקוֹל׃ כח וַיִּפְתַּח יַי אֶת־פִּי הָאֲתָנֹן וַתֹּאמֶר לְבַלְעָם מֶה־  
 עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ כִּי הִכִּיתָנִי זֶה שְׁלֵשׁ רְגָלִים׃ כט וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם לְאֲתָנֹן כִּי  
 הִתְעַלְלָתָ בִּי לֹו יִשְׁחָרֵב בִּידֵי כִי עָתָה הִרְגָתִיךְ׃ ל וַתֹּאמֶר הָאֲתָנֹן  
 אֶל־בַּלְעָם הֲלוֹא אָנֹכִי אֲתָנָךְ אֲשֶׁר־רֹכַבְתָּ עָלַי מֵעוֹדָךְ עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה  
 הִהְסַבְנָה הַסִּבְנָתִי לְעֵשׂוֹת לָךְ כֹּה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא׃ לא וַיִּגְלֵל יַי אֶת־עֵינָיו בַּלְעָם  
 וַיֵּרָא אֶת־מִלְאָדָי יַי נֹצֵב בַּדֶּרֶךְ וַחֲרָבוּ שְׁלֹפָה בִּידֹו וַיִּקַּד וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ  
 לְאִפָּיו׃ לב וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מִלְאָדָי יַי עַל־מָה הִכִּיתָ אֶת־אֲתָנָךְ זֶה שְׁלוֹשׁ  
 רְגָלִים הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי יִצְאָתִי לְשֹׁטֹן כִּי־יִרַט הַדֶּרֶךְ לְנִגְדִי׃ לג וַתֵּרָאֲנִי הָאֲתָנֹן  
 וַתַּט לִפְנֵי זֶה שְׁלֵשׁ רְגָלִים אוֹלִי נִטְתָה מִפְּנֵי כִי עָתָה גַם־אֲתַכָּה הִרְגָתִי  
 וְאוֹתָהּ הַחַיִּיתִי׃ לד וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם אֶל־מִלְאָדָי יַי חֲטָאתִי בִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי  
 אַתָּה נֹצֵב לְקִרְאתִי בַדֶּרֶךְ וְעָתָה אִסְרַע בְּעֵינָיִךְ אֲשׁוּבָה לִי׃ לה וַיֹּאמֶר  
 מִלְאָדָי יַי אֶל־בַּלְעָם לָךְ עִם־הָאֲנָשִׁים וְאַפְסֵ אֶת־הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר־אָדַבְּרָ  
 אֵלָיִךְ אֲתוֹ תִדְבָּר וַיִּלְדָּד בַּלְעָם עִם־שָׂרֵי בָלָק׃

(21) When he arose in the morning, Balaam saddled his ass and departed with the Moabite dignitaries.

(22) But God was incensed at his going; so an angel of the Lord placed himself in his way as an adversary. He was riding on his she-ass, with his two servants alongside,

(23) when the ass caught sight of the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. The

**ass swerved from the road and went into the fields; and Balaam beat the ass to turn her back onto the road.**

**(24) The angel of the Lord then stationed himself in a lane between the vineyards, with a fence on either side.**

**(25) The ass, seeing the angel of the Lord, pressed herself against the wall and squeezed Balaam's foot against the wall; so he beat her again.**

**(26) Once more the angel of the Lord moved forward and stationed himself on a spot so narrow that there was no room to swerve right or left.**

**(27) When the ass now saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam; and Balaam was furious and beat the ass with his stick.**

**(28) Then the Lord opened the ass's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?"**

**(29) Balaam said to the ass, "You have made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I'd kill you."**

**(30) The ass said to Balaam, "Look, I am the ass that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?" And he answered, "No."**

**(31) Then the Lord uncovered Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, his drawn sword in his hand; thereupon he bowed right down to the ground.**

**(32) The angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have you beaten your ass these three times? It is I who came out as an adversary, for the errand is obnoxious to me.**

**(33) And when the ass saw me, she shied away because of me those three times. If she had not shied away from me, you are the one I should have killed, while sparing her."**

**(34) Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, "I erred because I did not know that you were standing in my way. If you still disapprove, I will turn back."**

**(35) But the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men. But you must say nothing except what I tell you." So Balaam went on with Balak's dignitaries.**

**(21) When he arose in the morning, Balaam saddled his ass:**

The story of Balaam's ass is one of the most famous in all of Tanakh.

**When he arose in the morning, Balaam saddled his ass and departed with the Moabite dignitaries:** Balaam is still hoping to find some fundamental flaw in the Jewish people that will enable him to curse them with God's consent.

**(22) But God was incensed at his going:** It is not entirely clear how and why Balaam has now incurred God's wrath. Since God has not forbade Balaam from proceeding with Balak's messengers, Balaam has not violated any prohibition by doing so. Why, then, is God incensed?

Perhaps Balaam should have made it clear to those dignitaries that he could go with them solely on the condition that he would speak only what the Almighty allowed him to say. By not doing so, Balaam created the false impression that the Almighty was actually allowing him to execute the curse, and this is why God was incensed.

Or perhaps it is because Balaam, while following God's immediate instructions, has failed to understand the underlying, essential message. The Almighty is therefore angry with Balaam in the manner of a teacher disappointed by a clueless disciple.

In all events, there is an important irony here. The great prophet Balaam, who has been hired for his proven skill in directing God's wrath through curses, is now himself the target of God's wrath.

**So an angel of the Lord placed himself in his way as an adversary:** The angel blocks Balaam's path three times until Balaam is completely obstructed from proceeding any further. The purpose of these actions is not to stop Balaam (although that would be easy for the angel to do), but to influence him, in the hope that he will come to understand a vital message. Not to lay it all out for Balaam in black and white, however, but in such a way that Balaam will himself draw the right conclusions.

**(23) When the ass caught sight of the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. The ass swerved from the road and went into the fields:** Initially, Balaam is given the widest possible berth for maneuvering.

When at first we fail to catch the hints that the Almighty throws our way, He then partially blocks our direct path, but still does not completely close off every possibility of advancing in the wrong direction.

**And Balaam beat the ass to turn her back onto the road:** We know from Moses' hard-learned example that there is no need to "smite the rock" – one must speak to it. But Balaam has not yet learned this lesson.

**(24-25) The angel of the Lord then stationed himself in a lane between the vineyards, with a fence on either side. The ass ... squeezed Balaam's foot against the wall:** Balaam's foot is now squeezed against the wall, but the ass is still on its feet. At this stage, Balaam is given one last opportunity to decide of his own volition to abandon the unseemly path that he is pursuing.

**(25) So he beat her again: Here again we have an obvious parallel to Moses and the rock:** "Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod" (Num. 20:11).

**(26-27) Once more the angel of the Lord moved forward and stationed himself on a spot so narrow that there was no room ... The ass now ... lay down under Balaam:** At this third stage Balaam no longer has any possibility of independent movement. In such a state, he has no choice but to obey, which means that his decision is no longer as valuable, and he loses the chance of receiving any reward for his correction.

**And Balaam was furious:** Instead of realizing that his ass's actions are a consequence of God's anger and of the presence of the angel, Balaam is now himself enraged. The inadequacy of Balaam's reaction demonstrates how ill-qualified he is to fulfill the order he has been contracted to perform, which exceeds his level.

**And beat the ass with his stick:** Balaam's blows to the ass now exceed even Moses' two blows to the rock. Balaam still insists on maintaining his authoritative attitude toward the world – even more so than Moses. And that is why he forfeits any opportunity to rise to level that Moses and the Jewish people occupy.

**(28) Then the Lord opened the ass's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?":** Balaam is yet again challenged to answer a question that probes his overall awareness of his situation.

**(29) Balaam said to the ass: You have made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I'd kill you:** And once again Balaam fails the test. Notwithstanding his preeminent status as a prophet, he sees no Divine plan here. He continues to perceive everything as pure happenstance.

**If I had a sword with me, I'd kill you:** The Midrash points out the poignant irony here. Here is Balaam on his way to destroy an entire nation through the agency of a curse – that is, through his power of speech alone. But against a mere ass he is helpless without a sword, and laments not having one handy to do the job.

This irony is even more pronounced in Hebrew, which calls the sharp cutting blade of a sword the "mouth" of the sword. That connection is understood as not merely coincidental, but as demonstrating that sword and mouth are perceived as mutually complementary elements.

In this case, Balaam's plan to use his mouth as a sword (i.e., to impose a lethal curse upon Israel) ends with God's angel wielding a sword against him, to disable Balaam's mouth from uttering the curse.

When later, in the war with Midian, Israel brings Balaam to justice and he is killed, the Torah says very specifically, "They also put Balaam son of Beor to the sword" (Num. 31:8). Ultimately, then, Balaam's penchant for using his mouth as a sword will be permanently and irrevocably terminated by the swift blow of an actual sword.

**(30) The ass said to Balaam, "Look, I am the ass that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?" And he answered, "No":** Only when Balaam

is forcibly constrained not to beat his ass, but instead to engage in dialogue with it, does he gradually admit that he is wrong.

**(34) Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, “I erred because I did not know that you were standing in my way:** Balaam says, *chatati ki lo yada’ti*, literally, “I have sinned because I did not know... .”

Here Balaam once again misconstrues his situation. His sin consists not in not having known of the angel’s presence (mere ignorance is never itself a sin), but in having given no thought whatsoever to the meaning of his ass’s highly unusual behavior, and in not reacting to the incident. Believing that it was nothing but a chance occurrence, Balaam actually “erred” because he is still determined to continue his journey and do the work for Balak.

**If you still disapprove, I will turn back:** Instead of telling the angel resolutely, “I shall now turn back, and, in fact, I am already on my way,” Balaam equivocates, as it were: “So, do you really think that I should turn back? If so, very well. Just say so, and I will.”

Balaam neither feels nor expresses any true remorse, but, on the contrary, it is clear from his response to the angel that even after everything that has happened he still wants to go on to meet Balak. And the angel responds: “Go with the men.” Because here once again, as the Midrash says: “Heaven leads a person in the direction that he wishes to be led” (see the commentary to Num. 22:19 above).

## § 21. BALAAM'S PROPHECIES

### § 21.1. BALAK AND BALAAM MEET (22:36-40)

לו וישמע בלק כי בא בלעם ויצא לקראתו אל-עיר מואב אשר  
על-גבול ארנו אשר בקצה הגבול: לו ויאמר בלק אל-בלעם הלא  
שלח שלחתי אליך לקרא-לך למה לא-הלכת אלי האמנם לא אוכל  
כבדך: לח ויאמר בלעם אל-בלק הנה-באתי אליך עתה היכל אוכל  
דבר מאומה הדבר אשר ישם אלהים בפי אתו אדבר: לט וילך  
בלעם עם-בלק ויבאו קרית חצות: מ ויזבח בלק בקר וצאן וישלח  
בלעם ולשרים אשר אתו:

(36) When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at Ir-moab, which is on the Arnon border, at its farthest point.

(37) Balak said to Balaam, “When I first sent to invite you, why didn’t you come to me? Am I really unable to reward you?”

(38) But Balaam said to Balak, “And now that I have come to you, have I the power to speak freely? I can utter only the word that God puts into my mouth.”

(39) Balaam went with Balak and they came to Kiriath-huzoth.

(40) Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and had them served to Balaam and the dignitaries with him.

(36) He went out to meet him at Ir-moab: From its name, Ir-moab, which means “the city of Moab,” we can infer that it was the capital city of the Moabite territories.

**Which is on the Arnon border, at its farthest point:** Literally, “On the border of Arnon, which is in the utmost part of the border.”

That last addition indicates that this is the boundary at which Moab had previously managed to stem Sihon’s incursions. That is, Moab’s capital is now located at the border. In the context of the current story, this is meant to highlight Moab’s dire concerns about what is happening just beyond their border, territory that is now occupied by the Jewish people.

**(37) Balak said to Balaam, “When I first sent to invite you, why didn’t you come to me? Am I really unable to reward you?”:** Because Balak’s messengers never informed him of the real reason that Balaam initially refused to come (God’s disapproval of the enterprise), Balak still believes that it is all a matter of the compensation.

**(38) But Balaam said to Balak, “And now that I have come to you, have I the power to speak freely? I can utter only the word that God puts into my mouth”:** Balaam explains to Balak his mistake, and sets the record straight.

**(40) Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and had them served to Balaam and the dignitaries with him:** This seems like just an ordinary display of typical Middle Eastern hospitality, and, if so, it is not clear why the Torah sees fit to mention it.

But we can understand it this way. From the fact that Balak has made no reply to Balaam’s last comment, we can infer that Balak has been left speechless, perturbed as he is by the latest revelation from Balaam that even now everything depends on God’s will, and the curse might never come to pass. In such circumstances, there is nothing for Balak to do but to interrupt the dialogue by busying himself with the expected rituals of hospitality.

#### § 21.2. BALAAM’S FIRST PROPHECY (22:41-23:10)

מֵא וַיְהִי בַבֶּקֶר וַיִּקַּח בָּלָק אֶת־בִּלְעָם וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ בַמִּזֶּה בְּעַל וַיֵּרָא מַשְׁם  
 קִצֵּה הָעָם:  
 א וַיֹּאמֶר בִּלְעָם אֶל־בָּלָק בְּנֵה־לִי בָזָה שִׁבְעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וְהִקֵּן לִי בָזָה  
 שִׁבְעָה פָרִים וְשִׁבְעָה אֵילִים: ב וַיַּעַשׂ בָּלָק כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר בִּלְעָם וַיַּעַל

בָּלַק וּבִלְעָם פָּר וְאֵיל בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ: ג וַיֹּאמֶר בִּלְעָם לְבָלַק הַתִּיַעֵב עַל-  
 עֲלִתְךָ וְאַלְכָה אוֹלֵי יְקָרָה יִי לְקִרְאֹתַי וּדְבַר מֵה־יִרְאַנִי וְהִגַּדְתִּי לָךְ  
 וַיֵּלֶךְ שְׁפִי: ד וַיִּקְרַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל-בִּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֶת-שִׁבְעַת הַמִּזְבְּחֹת  
 עֲרִכְתִּי וְאָעַל פֶּר וְאֵיל בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ: ה וַיֵּשֶׁם יִי דָבָר בְּפִי בִלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב  
 אֶל-בָּלַק וְכֹה תִדְבֹר: וַיָּשָׁב אֵלָיו וְהִנֵּה נֹצֵב עַל-עֲלֹתוֹ הוּא וְכָל-שָׂרֵי  
 מוֹאָב: ז וַיֵּשֶׂא מְשָׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר מִז־אָרֶם יִנְחֲנִי בָלַק מִלְּד־מוֹאֵב מִהַרְרֵי-  
 קָדְם לְכֹה אָרְהֶ-לִי יַעֲקֹב וּלְכֹה זַעֲמָה יִשְׂרָאֵל: ח מָה אֶקֶב לֹא קִבָּה אֵל  
 וּמָה אֲזַעֵם לֹא זַעֵם יִי: ט כִּי-מֵרֹאשׁ צְרִיִם אֶרְאֶנּוּ וּמִגְּבָעוֹת אֲשׁוּרֵנּוּ  
 הַזֶּ-עַם לְבַדָּד יִשְׁכֹּן וּבְגוֹזִים לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב: י מִי מִנָּה עֶפְרַי יַעֲקֹב וּמִסַּפֵּר  
 אֶת-רִבְעֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תָּמַת נַפְשֵׁי מוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְתִהְיֶי אַחֲרֵיתִי כְּמָהוּ:

(41) In the morning Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth-baal. From there he could see a portion of the people.

(23:1) Balaam said to Balak, "Build me seven altars here and have seven bulls and seven rams ready here for me."

(2) Balak did as Balaam directed; and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.

(3) Then Balaam said to Balak, "Stay here beside your offerings while I am gone. Perhaps the Lord will grant me a manifestation, and whatever He reveals to me I will tell you." And he went off alone.

(4) God manifested Himself to Balaam, who said to Him, "I have set up the seven altars and offered up a bull and a ram on each altar."

(5) And the Lord put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, "Return to Balak and speak thus."

(6) So he returned to him and found him standing beside his offerings, and all the Moabite dignitaries with him.

(7) He took up his theme, and said: "From Aram has Balak brought me, Moab's king from the hills of the East: Come, curse me Jacob, come, tell Israel's doom!

(8) How can I damn whom God has not damned, how doom when the Lord has not doomed?

**(9) As I see them from the mountain tops, gaze on them from the heights, there is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations,**

**(10) Who can count the dust of Jacob, number the dust-cloud of Israel? May I die the death of the upright, may my fate be like theirs!**

The main theme of the first of Balaam's four prophecies is the impossibility of fulfilling Balak's request to curse the Jewish people.

When Balaam says, "I see them from the mountain tops, gaze on them from the heights," the Midrash understands "the mountain tops" to mean the Patriarchs, and "the heights" as the Matriarchs. The impossibility of cursing the Jewish nation derives from its foundations, which create a special protection for it. Thus, the first prophecy is related to the past history of the Jewish people.

**(41) In the morning Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth-baal. From there he could see a portion of the people:** Although Balaam is a specialist in curses, it is Balak who time and again proposes to Balaam the locations that he believes are the most conducive to cursing. The Midrash therefore believes that Balak was himself a sorcerer, but his specialization was somewhat different. He could only work as the tipster, as it were, who facilitates the crime "from the inside."

Although Balak has an excellent sense of where each target's flaws are felt most keenly (that is, the locations most suitable for a curse to take hold), he cannot describe those flaws vividly and convincingly. Thus, Balak could not cast the spell himself in order to bring about the curse. His charisma is insufficient to influence society to the point where it will be convinced of the full seriousness of those flaws. For that he needed Balaam's help.

In modern media terms, we could formulate this as "the editor-in-chief, intimately familiar with the vulnerabilities of the target he is resolved to destroy, invites a world-renowned, virulent journalist to write a scandalous and devastating exposé."

**Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth-baal. From there he could see a portion of the people:** The name of this place means "the heights of Baal." Baal (*ba`al*, literally, "master") is the name of a certain Canaanite-

Phoenician god (Jud. 2:11), but it is also a general term for any god worshipped through idolatry. Thus, we can understand “Bamoth-baal” here as heights named for one or more of the local deities.

Additionally, *bamah* is a common biblical word for an “altar used for bringing sacrifices out in the field,” as opposed to inside the Temple. Here, Bamoth-baal can mean a place for testing the Jewish people in order to accuse them, or at least some “portion of the people,” of idolatrous practices.

**From there he could see a portion of the people:** “Portion of” here in the Hebrew is *ketzeh*, from *katzeh*, the “end or edge” of some (often physical) object. Balak shows Balaam the nation’s “edge,” its marginal elements – some negative, unworthy aspect that would allow the curse to stick. Because every nation and society has at least some such elements, Balak is hoping for success.

**(23:1) Balaam said to Balak, “Build me seven altars here and have seven bulls and seven rams ready here for me”:** The number seven represents the completeness of the natural world. The idea of cursing Israel through the number seven, that is, with the help of nature, can be understood as suggesting that Israel is not essential to the proper functioning of the world, but, rather, is an extraneous and superfluous element of humanity.

This recalls Haman’s words to King Ahasuerus concerning the Jews: “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples ... and it is not in Your Majesty’s interest to tolerate them” (Esth. 3:8). The Hebrew, translated there as “dispersed,” is *u-meforad*, better rendered as “detached” – i.e., they are their own isolated thing that is not a part of the larger whole in any real sense.

Outwardly, Balak and Balaam fully acknowledge nature’s Divine foundations. But at the same time they say: “Israel is an outrageous phenomenon that is incompatible with nature, and is therefore harmful for the development of mankind.”

**(2) Balak did as Balaam directed; and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar:** Initially Balak and Balaam offer their sacrifices together. But this situation will change, as we shall see (Num. 23:30).

**(3-4) Perhaps the Lord will grant me a manifestation ... God manifested Himself to Balaam:** “Grant me a manifestation” is the translation here of the Hebrew *yikkareh likrati*, which denotes something that occurs by mere happenstance. Because Balaam normally receives his prophecies in a dream state, he refers to any meeting with Divinity in a waking state as an event that can happen only by chance.

**And he went off alone:** That is, in calmness and silence – there is only stillness all around him. Balaam is focusing on immersion in the spiritual, on separation from the normal flow of everyday reality. (The Hebrew here *shefi*, “alone,” is a rather unusual word. Targum Onkelos and Rashi translate it as “alone.” Later commentators, based on alternative translation of *shefi* as “foot” found in the Talmud, emphasize that Balaam went on foot, that is, without the ass. While that animal paid heed to the angel and stopped in its tracks, Balaam persisted in his course of action and ignored the heavenly warning.)

**(4) God manifested Himself to Balaam, who said to Him, “I have set up the seven altars and offered up a bull and a ram on each altar”:** Balaam opens his conversation with God with an account of what he has already done. He feels that because he has demonstrated that his goal is to maintain the stability of Divine order in the world, he can expect that God will respond positively to his request. Such emphasis on technical details (such as meticulously set up altars, and bulls and rams offered) even to the detriment of the actual content is characteristic of such magical undertakings, where a person is using Higher powers for his own nefarious purposes. Such emphasis on technical details even to the detriment of the actual content is characteristic of such magical undertakings, where a person is using Higher powers for his own nefarious purposes.

**(6) So he returned to him and found him standing beside his offerings, and all the Moabite dignitaries with him:** By its very nature a curse is a social action. Thus, the entire Moab elite is impatiently standing by for the result.

**(7) He took up his theme:** The Hebrew here is *meshalo*. A *mashal* is a “parable,” from the root *M-SH-L* which as a verb also means to “rule” or “dominate.” Thus, Balaam utters “imperatives.” Balaam’s prophecies

are called parables, echoing the bards, *moshelim*, the “storytellers” in parables of Sihon (see Num. 21:27).

A parable (*mashal*) is a form of poetic expression designed to give force to a certain view of a given situation, and then, as it takes root in the public consciousness, to create a dominant attitude that becomes a “self-fulfilling prophecy.” The power of a parable is realized through the creation of just such stereotypes within our imagination.

**And said: From Aram has Balak brought me, Moab's king from the hills of the East: Come, curse me Jacob, come, tell Israel's doom!:** Balaam begins by speaking of himself, and of the order he has received from Balak.

**From Aram has Balak brought me:** Aram (in Mesopotamia) is where the families of Nahor and Laban were living. Although they had decided to remain faithful to monotheism, at the same time they also integrated themselves into the larger world of idolaters and idolatry. We have already noted (in the *Bible Dynamics* commentary to Gen. 22:23) that assimilation into Aramaean culture is a leading temptation for the Jewish people, one that can lead to their destruction.

**(8) How can I damn whom God has not damned, how doom when the Lord has not doomed?:** Balaam must act within the framework determined and approved by God. The best he can do is to try to direct the Almighty's wrath toward the persons or things of his own choosing. But if there is no such anger at all, then Balaam is powerless. Even if there are unworthy people on the “edges” of the Jewish nation, that is, in its marginal social strata, the Almighty's anger toward them is not so fierce that it can be directed at the entire nation.

**(9) As I see them from the mountain tops, gaze on them from the heights:** The straightforward meaning of this verse is that Balaam is expressing a view of the Jewish people consistent with his own arrogant self-image. He sees himself as looking down from a great height upon the entire world.

But the Midrash understands “the mountain tops” as referring to the Patriarchs, and “the heights” – to the Matriarchs of the Jewish people. Balaam is saying that it is they who afford protection from the curse. Even if certain elements among the people have engaged in idolatry (Balak's reason for choosing the heights of Baal as the place to

attempt the curse), the Jewish nation as a whole, to whom even those idolaters belong, is a blessed people.

**There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations:** This people is not like all the others. It does not obey the usual rules. “Although I know better than anyone how to curse nations,” Balaam arrogantly declares, “in this case I find myself unable to fulfill Balak’s request.”

**A people ... not reckoned among the nations:** The Jewish people are not listed among the seventy nations of the world into which humanity was divided after the Deluge (Gen. 10), nor are they even a product of the natural evolution of those nations. Israel is a special project – God’s brainchild, as it were – with its own uniquely Divine mission. Because they can resist nature by transcending it, the idea of cursing them for “disagreeing with nature” will simply not work.

This definition of the Jews as “a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations” is likely one of the most remarkable predictions of all those that have been proven true over the millennia. The fate of the Jewish people has always been entirely different from that of any other people in similar circumstances. But even so, the Jews themselves, from the inside, often fail to see this uniqueness. It is therefore important that this special quality be emphasized “from the outside” by an alien, even hostile, prophet.

**(10) Who can count the dust of Jacob, number the dust-cloud of Israel?:** A curse normally leads to a decrease in the numbers of its target and even to their complete disappearance. But this does not apply to the Jewish people at all, for they defy any attempt at measurement. The influence of the Jewish people on the world is greatly disproportional to their numbers.

**May I die the death of the upright, may my fate be like theirs!:** As he ends this first prophecy, Balaam once again speaks of himself.

**May I die the death of the upright:** We should note that Balaam does not speak of a desire to live the life of the upright, but only to “die the death of the upright.” That is, Balaam wishes to share the lot of the righteous in the afterlife and to be there with the Jews. But during his lifetime he has no desire whatsoever to be with them.

Balaam is a complex and conflicted personality, who admires Israel and understands their greatness, but at the same time feels himself repulsed by them. A parallel to Balaam in modern history can be seen in Nietzsche, who admired the Jewish people but also hated them, speaking of the Jews' greatness but not wishing to associate with them in any way.

### § 21.3. BALAAM'S SECOND PROPHECY (23:11-24)

יא וַיֹּאמֶר בָּלַק אֶל-בִּלְעָם מַה עָשִׂיתָ לִּי לְקַבֵּי אֵיבֵי לְקַחְתִּיךָ וְהִנֵּה  
 בִּרְכַתְךָ בְּרָדָה: יב וַיַּעַן וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֵת אֲשֶׁר יָשִׁים יְיָ בְּפִי אֶתּוֹ אֲשַׁמֵּר  
 לְדַבֵּר: יג וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בָּלַק לְדֹ-נָא אֲתִי אֶל-מִקְוֹם אַחֵר אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶנּוּ  
 מִשָּׁם אֶפְס קָצְהוּ תִרְאֶה וְכִלּוֹ לֹא תִרְאֶה וְקִבְּנוּ-לִי מִשָּׁם: יד וַיִּקְחֵהוּ  
 שָׂדֶה צֹפִים אֶל-רֹאשׁ הַפְּסָגָה וַיָּבִין שְׁבַעַה מִזְבַּחַת וַיַּעַל פָּר וְאַיִל  
 בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ: טו וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-בָּלַק הֲתִיַּעֵב כֹּה עַל-עֲלֹתֶיךָ וְאַנְכִי אֶקְרָה  
 כֹּה: טז וַיִּקְרַר יְיָ אֶל-בִּלְעָם וַיִּשֶׂם דָּבָר בְּפִיו וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אֶל-בָּלַק וְכֹה  
 תְּדַבֵּר: יז וַיָּבֵא אֵלָיו וְהִנּוּ נֹצֵב עַל-עֲלֹתוֹ וְשָׂרֵי מוֹאָב אֶתּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ בָּלַק  
 מַה-דָּבָר יִי: יח וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר קוּם בָּלַק וּשְׁמָע הַאֲזִינָה עֲדֵי בָנֵי  
 צֹפָר: יט לֹא אִישׁ אֶל וַיִּכְזֹב וּבִן-אָדָם וַיִּתְנַחֵם הוּא אִמְרָ וְלֹא יַעֲשֶׂה  
 וְדַבֵּר וְלֹא יִקְיַמְנָה: כ הִנֵּה בְרָד לְקַחְתִּי וּבְרָד וְלֹא אֲשִׁיבָנָה: כא לֹא-  
 הִבִּיט אֵנוֹן בִּיעֶקֶב וְלֹא-רָאָה עֹמֵל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ אֱלֹהָיו עֲמֹו וְתִרְוַעַת  
 מִלֶּדֶד בּוֹ: כב אֵל מוֹצִיאֵם מִמִּצְרַיִם כְּתוֹעַפֶת רָאִם לוֹ: כג כִּי לֹא-נָחַשׁ  
 בִּיעֶקֶב וְלֹא-קָסַם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּעַת יֹאמֶר לִיעֶקֶב וְלִישְׂרָאֵל מַה-פָּעַל  
 אֵל: כד הִזְעַם כָּל־בְּיָא יָקוּם וּכְאֲרִי יִתְנַשֵּׂא לֹא יִשְׁכַּב עַד-יֵאכַל טָרֶף  
 וְדַם-חֲלָלִים יִשְׁתֶּה:

(11) Then Balak said to Balaam, "What have you done to me? Here I brought you to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them!"

(12) He replied, "I can only repeat faithfully what the Lord puts in my mouth."

(13) Then Balak said to him, "Come with me to another place from which you can see them – you will see only

**a portion of them; you will not see all of them – and damn them for me from there.”**

**(14) With that, he took him to Sedehzophim, on the summit of Pisgah. He built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.**

**(15) And [Balaam] said to Balak, “Stay here beside your offerings, while I seek a manifestation yonder.”**

**(16) The Lord manifested Himself to Balaam and put a word in his mouth, saying, “Return to Balak and speak thus.”**

**(17) He went to him and found him standing beside his offerings, and the Moabite dignitaries with him. Balak asked him, “What did the Lord say?”**

**(18) And he took up his theme, and said: Up, Balak, attend, give ear unto me, son of Zippor!**

**(19) God is not man to be capricious, or mortal to change His mind. Would He speak and not act, promise and not fulfill?**

**(20) My message was to bless: When He blesses, I cannot reverse it.**

**(21) No harm is in sight for Jacob, no woe in view for Israel. The Lord their God is with them, and their King’s acclaim in their midst.**

**(22) God who freed them from Egypt is for them like the horns of the wild ox.**

**(23) Lo, there is no augury in Jacob, no divining in Israel: Jacob is told at once, yea Israel, what God has planned.**

**(24) Lo, a people that rises like a lion, leaps up like the king of beasts, rests not till it has feasted on prey and drunk the blood of the slain.**

**(11-12) Then Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me? Here I brought you to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them!” He replied, “I can only repeat faithfully what**

**the Lord puts in my mouth”**: Balak still fails to grasp the problematic nature of his request, although Balaam has already explained to Balak his mistake.

As Balak continues to press, Balaam is gradually moving away from him. We have already noted above that the difference between Balak and Balaam's behaviors may lie in their different religious attitudes: Balak the idolater believes that the problem is only in the proper organization of the curse, whereas Balaam, the monotheist, has a genuine desire to understand the will of the Almighty and to integrate himself into it.

**(13) Come with me to another place from which you can see them—you will see only a portion of them; you will not see all of them:** Even on his first attempt to curse Israel Balak had shown Balaam only “a portion of the people” (Num. 22:41). But that did not preclude the possibility of also seeing the nation in its entirety.

At this new location Balak again emphasizes to Balaam that he “will see only a portion of them, but not see all of them”; that is, here too there will be no opportunity to see the whole people. Completeness implies integrity, while a fragment that is torn from the whole will always be flawed. Balak is hoping that this approach will help Balaam bring the people's faults into clearer focus.

**(14) With that, he took him to Sedehzophim, on the summit of Pisgah. He built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar:** *Sedeh zophim* should be written as two separate words, as they appear in the Hebrew, *sedeh tzophim*, which can be translated as “Lookout Point.” The Torah later informs us that Moses died in this same area, the summit of Pisgah (Deut. 34:1). According to the Midrash, Balak sensed that this location was therefore especially problematic for the Jewish people, and he was counting on that for the success of the curse.

**(15-16) And [Balaam] said to Balak, “Stay here beside your offerings, while I seek a manifestation yonder.” The Lord manifested Himself to Balaam:** Literally, “While I chance a meeting yonder ... The Lord chanced to meet Balaam.” It is the same verb as *yikkareh* above (see the commentary to Num. 23:3).

**(16) The Lord manifested Himself to Balaam and put a word in his mouth, saying, “Return to Balak and speak thus”:** Here the Torah refers to God by His four-letter name *Y-H-W-H*, the tetragrammaton, which represents the Divine attribute of mercy. But earlier (Num. 23:4), in the words: “God manifested Himself to Balaam,” the Torah uses the Divine name *Elohim*, which represents the Divine attribute of strict justice.

Thus, a higher level of prophecy is here revealed to Balaam than before. He no longer says that he can find no opportune moment to execute the curse. Instead he now acknowledges the reality that cursing the Jewish people is categorically impossible, because they are intrinsically a blessed people.

**(17) He went to him and found him standing beside his offerings, and the Moabite dignitaries with him. Balak asked him, “What did the Lord say?”:** In the first cursing attempt (Num. 23:6) the wording was: “So he returned to him and found him standing beside his offerings, and *all* the Moabite dignitaries with him.” But here it is simply, “and the Moabite dignitaries with him.” From this variation the Midrash concludes that some of the Moabite dignitaries, now faced with the failure of the curse, begin to leave the stage. Balak’s royal status has already begun to falter, and he is nervous.

**(18) And he took up his theme, and said: Up, Balak, attend, give ear unto me, son of Zippor!:** For Balaam to address Balak this way is arrogant and even insulting. At his first attempt to curse, Balaam did not express himself to Balak in such terms. Apparently, Balaam now perceives his failures not as a problem in himself, but as Balak’s failure, seeing that the Almighty will not allow his order to be fulfilled.

**(19) God is not man to be capricious, or mortal to change His mind:** And now, since He has expressed his opinion in this matter, you (Balak) hope in vain that you can bribe or persuade Him.

It should be noted however that even Balaam himself acts contrary to this haughty sentiment. For although God at first forbade Balaam to proceed with Balak’s messengers, on their next visit he again put a request to God, hoping for a change in His decision. And in fact, that change that he was hoping for did actually occur.

The question of whether the Almighty can change His mind is by no means unambiguous. The prophet Samuel believed that He cannot (1 Sam. 15:29). But the Torah on a number of occasions states that the Almighty changed his mind (e.g., Gen. 6:6 and Exod. 32:14; for a detailed analysis of this topic see the *Biblical Dynamics* commentary there).

**(20) My message was to bless: When He blesses, I cannot reverse it:** We see here the dynamics of Balaam's development. At first, he, like Balak, is confident that he is fully capable of executing blessings and curses. Of course, Balaam (in his own words) "can say only what God tells him to say." But at the same time he imagines himself as a clever secretary who knows exactly how and when to slip a document to his boss for a signature, so that he can then brandish it as official, thereby molding the world to his own liking.

In his first attempt to curse Israel Balaam says (Num. 23:8) that he cannot curse what God has not cursed. In other words, although no opportune moment has as yet presented itself, and as strange as that is, surely such a moment will be found. But now he speaks differently: "When God blesses, how can one reverse that blessing?" That is, a curse in this instance is fundamentally impossible. Later, at his third attempt, Balaam will attain the understanding of the Jewish formula of blessing as a mirror – the formula given to Abraham in God's opening words to him: "I will bless those who bless you And curse him that curses you" (Gen. 12:3).

**(21) No harm is in sight for Jacob, no woe in view for Israel:** Not that the Jews are perfect; far from it. But even if there is something wrong or improper in Jacob, the Almighty does not keep this wickedness or evil "in sight," nor does He allow it to affect the status of the nation in general.

**The Lord their God is with them, and their King's acclaim in their midst:** The Almighty and His manifestation in the world are associated with none other than the Jewish people. In the eyes of the world, then, to desecrate this people – and how much more so, to curse them – would be perceived as a desecration of the Almighty Himself.

This is the same argument that Moses adduced to deflect the wrath of the Almighty from Israel in the incidents of the golden calf and the spies (Exod. 32:12, Num. 14:13). And Balaam too now understands it.

**(22) God who freed them from Egypt:** Balak, in his opening invitation to Balaam, described the situation as “There is a people that came out of Egypt” (Num. 22:5). And Balaam too repeated the same formulation (Num. 22:11). But now Balaam corrects it. This people did not come out of Egypt on their own; it was God Who brought them out. Thus, everything that happens to the Jewish people happens under the Almighty’s direct guidance, which is why it is impossible to “reverse” it (Num. 23:20).

**(23) Lo, there is no augury in Jacob, no divining in Israel:** There are two ways we can understand this verse.

It can mean that no sorcery or witchcraft is practiced among the Jewish people, because they have no need for such devices, seeing that they have a direct connection with God. (And indeed, any such practices are strictly forbidden in Judaism. See Exod. 22:17, Lev. 20:31, Deut. 18:19-12.)

Or, this verse can mean that no sorcery or witchcraft can ever be waged successfully against the Jewish people, because they are always under God’s immediate protection.

**Jacob is told at once, yea Israel, what God has planned:** Literally, “In time, it shall be told to (or regarding) Jacob and to (or regarding) Israel what God has done.” This verse too has two possible interpretations.

The first of those is how the translation above understands it. In due time God Himself will reveal to Jacob and to Israel what He has done. Thus, Israel has no need to engage in sorcery or witchcraft. These words can serve as an explanation of why there is no augury or divining among the Jewish people – corresponding to the first interpretation given above for the beginning of this verse.

The second variant of interpretation understands *le-ya’akov u-le-yisrael* as “regarding Jacob and Israel.” It shall be told (that is, all the nations of the world will tell) about Jacob and Israel that everything that has happened to them is entirely God’s doing. In this case, these words are an elaboration and explanation of what was said

earlier: "The Lord their God is with them, and their King's acclaim in their midst" (Num. 23:21).

**(24) Lo, a people that rises like a lion, leaps up like the king of beasts, rests not till it has feasted on prey and drunk the blood of the slain:** It is therefore futile to try to interfere in the activities of the Jewish people, or to try to prevent them from fulfilling their mission.

Thus, this entire second prophecy relates to the current state of the Jewish people. Its main theme is that it is impossible to curse even a portion of the Jewish nation. Even if, instead of seeing the entire nation as a unit, one focuses on just some portion of it, they all without exception play a role in the processes that are unfolding, and all of those processes are directed from Above.

#### § 21.4. THE CHANGE IN BALAAM'S POSITION, AND MOAB'S DESTINY

Earlier we compared Balaam's ability to administer curses and blessings from Above to the ability of a clever secretary to furtively obtain his boss's signature on critical documents. By doing so, that secretary has the power even to promote or overthrow entire enterprises and institutions. But at the same time, in the course of Balaam's attempts to bring about the curse his understanding of the problem changes.

At first Balaam explained his failure by saying, "How can I damn whom God has not damned, how doom when the Lord has not doomed?" (Num. 23:8). He was effectively saying to Balak: "I tried to get the Chief to sign, but I could find no convenient moment to make it happen. Since I obviously cannot sign it myself, I have to catch him at just the right time. Although I've had no luck so far, that does not mean that your request cannot be fulfilled. Let's try again."

In his second prophecy Balaam describes the situation differently: "My message was to bless: When He blesses, I cannot reverse it" (Nu. 23:20). That is: "The Chief is staunchly opposed on principle to signing any such document, and it is impossible to push it through." And yet, even now Balaam remains in his role of clever secretary.

But when Balak wants Balaam to attempt the curse yet a third time, Balaam recognizes the seriousness of the problem and changes his position. “Now Balaam, seeing that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness. As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the spirit of God came upon him” (Num. 24:1-2). That is, Balaam is no longer trying to be a clever secretary; he just “looks up” – he now only wants to do what the Chief has ordered. At that point “the spirit of God came upon him,” and he rises to the level of prophecy.

Balaam’s third prophecy is where he echoes the scheme of the blessing that God gave to Abraham. Says Balaam: “Blessed are they who bless you, accursed they who curse you!” That is, he finally comes to understand that this is not only about “the Chief refusing to sign Balak’s request,” but, rather, that for the sake of advancing all of mankind the Chief has specially created an object to serve as a “mirror to the world,” and any attempt to curse this object will achieve precisely the opposite result.

Balaam of course knew even before about the blessing given to Abraham. (As already noted above, Balaam adheres to the general framework of Jewish monotheism.) But apparently, he did not take that blessing seriously.

We can draw a parallel here to the attitude of the Christian church toward the Jewish people for many centuries. The church, better than anyone except for the Jews themselves, was thoroughly familiar with God’s word concerning the Jewish people and the blessings He had bestowed upon them. And yet, the church did not take any of that very seriously at all, for it believed that all that was an historical relic that has no relevancy whatsoever in modern times.

\* \* \*

When we compare Balaam’s first two prophecies with his third and fourth, we see a qualitative difference.

The first and second prophecies, which relate to Israel’s past and present, are Balaam’s reply to Balak’s requests (i.e., Balaam’s justification for denying those requests). The third prophecy, however,

is no longer associated with those requests, and operates at a completely different level.

In the first two prophecies, Balaam distances himself from everyone around him. In order to receive prophecy he withdraws, and attunes himself to the “magic.” By the third time, however, Balaam uses no special techniques. He finally sees the Jewish nation as a single, complete unit, “encamped tribe by tribe” (Num. 24:2). Only from that moment on does he begin to prophesy to the future.

In his first prophecy Balaam says almost nothing about the nation of Israel. Rather, he describes the order he has received from Balak, and declares that it is impossible for him to fulfill it. He then expresses a desire to die the death of a righteous man. As already noted, the main theme of Balaam's prophecy is his apology to Balak for not complying with his request. In his second prophecy, Balaam is no longer talking about himself, but is addressing Balak, and rather impertinently at that: “Up, Balak, attend, give ear unto me, son of Zippor!” Here Balaam is no longer apologizing, but proposing that Balak rescind the order. Since there can be no change in the Almighty's position, there is no point even to try. Any attempt is doomed *ab initio* to fail.

It would seem that if Balak is prudent and trusts Balaam's professional qualifications, he would have to accept this argument. But when Balak persists in yet a third attempt, the result is that instead of getting his wish to see the Jewish people cursed, he receives a prophecy about the destruction of his own Moabite nation. Although Israel does not constitute a threat to Moab at this time, in the future – and perhaps in response to just such manic, hostile aggression – Israel will conquer Moab and destroy it.

#### § 21.5. BALAAM'S THIRD PROPHECY (23:25-24:9)

כה וַיֹּאמֶר בָּלָק אֶל-בִּלְעָם גַּם-קָב לֹא תִקְבְּנוּ גַם-בִּרְדָּךְ לֹא  
 תִבְרַכְנוּ: כִּי וַיַּעַן בִּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-בָּלָק הֲלֹא דִבַּרְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ לֵאמֹר כֹּל  
 אֲשֶׁר-יִדְבֹר יְיָ אִתּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה: כִּי וַיֹּאמֶר בָּלָק אֶל-בִּלְעָם לְכֵה-נָא אֶקְחֶךָ  
 אֶל-מְקוֹם אַחַר אוֹלֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵינֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְקִבַּתוּ לִי מִשָּׁם: כה וַיִּקַּח

בָּלַק אֶת־בְּלָעַם רֹאשׁ הַפְּעֹר הַנִּשְׁקָף עַל־פְּנֵי הַיְשִׁימוֹן: כט וַיֹּאמֶר  
בְּלָעַם אֶל־בָּלַק בְּנֵה־לִי בָזָה שְׂבָעָה מִזְבַּחַת וְהִכֵּן לִי בָזָה שְׂבָעָה פָּרִים  
וּשְׂבָעָה אֵילִם: לו וַיַּעַשׂ בָּלַק כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר בְּלָעַם וַיַּעַל פָּר וְאֵיל בְּמִזְבְּחַת:

א וַיִּרְא בְּלָעַם כִּי טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי יי לְבָרַךְ אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא־הִלְךְ כַּפְּעַם־  
כַּפְּעַם לְקִרְיַת נַחְשִׁים וַיִּשֶׁת אֶל־הַמַּדְבָּר פָּנָיו: ב וַיֵּשֶׂא בְּלָעַם אֶת־  
עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל שֹׁכֵן לְשִׁבְטָיו וְתַהֲי עֲלָיו רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים: ג וַיֵּשֶׂא  
מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר נֹאֵם בְּלָעַם בְּנֹו בְּעֹר וּנְאֹם הַגִּבֹּר שְׁתֵּם הַעִיז: ד נֹאֵם שְׁמַע  
אִמְרֵי־אֵל אֲשֶׁר מַחֲזֶה שְׂדֵי יַחֲזֶה נִפְל וּגְלוֹי עֵינָיִם: ה מֵה־טָבוּ אֱהָלֶיךָ  
יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכַּנְתֶּיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל: ו כְּנַחֲלִים נָטְיוּ כְּגַגְתַּ עָלֶי נִהַר כְּאֶהֱלִים נָטַע  
יִי כְּאֶרְזִים עָלֵי־מַיִם: ז יִזְל־מַיִם מִדְּלִי וְזָרְעוּ בְּמַיִם רַבִּים וְיָרֵם מֵאֲגַג  
מִלְכּוֹ וְתִנְשָׂא מַלְכְּתוֹ: ח אֵל מוֹצִיאֻ מִמְּצֹרִים כְּתוֹעַפֶת רֹאֵם לוֹ יֹאכֵל  
גוֹיִם צְרִיו וְעִצְמַתִּיהֶם יִגְרֵם וְחֻצְיוֹ יִמְחִץ: ט כָּרַע שָׁכַב כְּאֶרֶץ וּכְלָבִיא  
מִי יִקְיַמְנוּ מִבְּרַכְיָךְ בְּרוּךְ וְאֶרְרֶיךָ אֲרוּר:

(25) Thereupon Balak said to Balaam, “Don’t curse them and don’t bless them!”

(26) In reply, Balaam said to Balak, “But I told you: Whatever the Lord says, that I must do.”

(27) Then Balak said to Balaam, “Come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps God will deem it right that you damn them for me there.”

(28) Balak took Balaam to the peak of Peor, which overlooks the wasteland.

(29) Balaam said to Balak, “Build me here seven altars, and have seven bulls and seven rams ready for me here.”

(30) Balak did as Balaam said: he offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.

(24:1) Now Balaam, seeing that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness.

(2) As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the spirit of God came upon him.

(3) Taking up his theme, he said: Word of Balaam son of Beor, word of the man whose eye is true,

(4) **Word of him who hears God's speech, who beholds visions from the Almighty, prostrate, but with eyes unveiled:**

(5) **How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel!**

(6) **Like palm-groves that stretch out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars beside the water;**

(7) **Their boughs drip with moisture, their roots have abundant water. Their king shall rise above Agag, their kingdom shall be exalted.**

(8) **God who freed them from Egypt is for them like the horns of the wild ox. They shall devour enemy nations, crush their bones, and smash their arrows.**

(9) **They crouch, they lie down like a lion, like the king of beasts; who dare rouse them? Blessed are they who bless you, accursed they who curse you!**

(25-26) **Thereupon Balak said to Balaam, "Don't curse them and don't bless them!" In reply, Balaam said to Balak, "But I told you: Whatever the Lord says, that I must do":** If after the first prophecy Balak only complained about Balaam's failure to fulfill the order (Num. 23:11), he now casts aspersions on Balaam's professional qualifications. As if to say: "Given that you cannot curse Israel, then at least don't bless them either! You are doing much more harm than good."

(26) **In reply, Balaam said to Balak, "But I told you: Whatever the Lord says, that I must do":** This time Balaam responds sternly: "If you were not able to understand what I kept telling you before, you have only yourself to blame for this outcome. So don't go faulting me for this failure."

(27) **Then Balak said to Balaam, "Come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps God will deem it right that you damn them for me there":** In the previous instance Balak made no mention of the Divine will, because he was relying on the power of Balaam's curse. But now, even as his confidence in Balaam's abilities has been greatly undermined, he is still hoping to be favored from Above.

(28) **Balak took Balaam to the peak of Peor, which overlooks the wasteland:** Hebrew has two different words for wilderness or desert. *Midbar*, the most common word, is an arid steppe which, although

mostly barren, can support livestock that lives and grazes there. But *yeshimon* is a bleak and bare wilderness in which nothing can grow, and the presence of life is simply impossible. It is that Hebrew word *yeshimon* that is here translated as “wasteland”: “Balak took Balaam to the peak of Peor, which overlooks the wasteland.”

Balak is hoping that the mere sight of such lifeless desolation will restore to Balaam his “curse mindset.” But Balaam will have none of that. He “turns his face toward the wilderness,” i.e., to the *midbar*, where life does exist. Without changing his location, and merely by turning himself in the other direction, he changes his outlook and transitions from death to life.

**Balak took Balaam to the peak of Peor:** Peor is mentioned later (Num. 25:3) as a form of idolatry that seduced a portion of the Israelites. According to the Midrash, the key principle of the Peor cult was naturalness elevated to its absolute, including pandering to animal nature in its coarsest, basest form. Allegiance to this cult was expressed through its worshipers’ public demonstration of their crudest bodily functions. Accordingly, the Midrash explains that Balak’s last stand here for cursing the Jewish people was his hope that the natural animal principle would begin to dominate in the Jewish consciousness over awareness of their world mission and of being God’s chosen people. Balaam’s third attempt to curse Israel is expressed in terms of their future. As Jewish history evolves, which, then, will ultimately prevail among the Jewish people? Natural animality, or awareness of their supernatural mission?

**(29) Balaam said to Balak, “Build me here seven altars, and have seven bulls and seven rams ready for me here”:** This final test takes the form of “natural vs. supernatural.” For the curse to succeed, naturalness, expressed by the number seven, must dominate.

**(30) Balak did as Balaam said: he offered up a bull and a ram on each altar:** This time only Balak offers sacrifices; Balaam does not participate. As noted earlier, Balaam is already distancing himself from Balak.

**(24:1) Now Balaam, seeing that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness:** In the midst of this process,

Balaam, who has already moved away from Balak, now changes his plan and finally breaks from him entirely. Having abandoned magic, that is, no longer trying to force Heaven to fulfill a human order, Balaam rises to a more advanced level of understanding. Thus, he will now speak of the future. He begins to understand not only what is happening now, but also the direction that future events will take.

**But turned his face toward the wilderness:** As explained above, Balaam turns his gaze from yeshimon to midbar, from a bleak and lifeless wilderness to an inhabited one. In other words, he shifts his gaze towards the camp of Israel.

**(2) As Balaam looked up:** Literally, “Balaam raised his eyes.” But since Balaam was standing on the mountaintop, and the Jewish people were in the Jordan valley below, there was no need for Balaam to raise his eyes in the physical sense in order to see Israel’s encampment. The Midrash therefore understands “Balaam raised his eyes” in the spiritual sense, as referring to Balaam’s advancement. He lifted his eyes above the constricted natural world, in order to get a glimpse of the Almighty and to understand His wishes.

**And saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe:** Balaam sees nothing of their uniquely Jewish “religious spirituality,” nor does he say anything about the Torah. He sees only the people. But he sees them as a complete and fully functioning organism, which is how Israel exerts its greatest influence on the rest of the world.

**The spirit of God came upon him:** Although Balaam has enormous potential, he most often uses it incorrectly. But when he changes his approach, he achieves great success.

**(3-4) Taking up his theme, he said: Word of Balaam son of Beor, word of the man whose eye is true, word of him who hears God’s speech, who beholds visions from the Almighty, Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled:** Balaam’s introduction to his third prophecy seems like an exercise in pompous self-exaltation. Note that there was no such introduction in his two earlier prophecies.

We can therefore understand these words as expressing not just Balaam’s usual image of himself, but his response to the higher level of the Revelation that he is now receiving. The only problem here is that Balaam attributes his receipt of such prophecy to his own abilities and

considers it his own personal success, instead of expressing gratitude to the Almighty for raising him to that level.

**Who beholds visions from the Almighty:** The Hebrew here is Shaddai, one of the Almighty's less common names, but one that is highly specific in its meaning. The Divine name *El Shaddai*, "the All-Mighty" (literally, "He Who never lacks sufficient [power]") indicates that the Divine promise will be fulfilled, even if for now it still remains only a promise (see the *Bible Dynamics* on Gen. 17:1, Exod. 6:3)..

**The man whose eye is true:** Literally, the expression *shetum ha-'ayin* means "deep-eyed" or "closed-eyed." The Midrash tells us that Balaam deliberately gouged out one of his eyes, leaving his eye socket empty, in order to see the mystical world through his "blind eye." Thus, he kept one of his eyes for ordinary vision, while using the other for supernatural communication with higher worlds.

The "blind clairvoyant" is well-known in many cultures. That is, the idea that physical blindness can be used to enhance supernatural vision. (Or the analogous idea that only in conditions of complete silence can one begin to discern the Divine voice.) As another example, we know that there were shamans who used to descend into caves to a depth of 130 feet (40 meters) or more, in order "to be able to perceive higher worlds" in that absolute, transcendental darkness.

But Balaam, having reserved one eye for mystical visions, sees the real world with only his one remaining eye, which renders his vision one-dimensional. Because he lacks stereoscopic vision, he has lost his depth perception, and sees all reality as flat, which is why Balaam initially cannot understand the Jewish people. Only after observing Israel several times, and assembling a stereoscopic composite of the images of his first and second failures, is Balaam finally able to achieve a deeper understanding of the whole situation.

**Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled:** In the physical sense, Balaam's position – "prostrating" with "eyes unveiled" – suggests that Balaam prophesies in a state of ecstasy. But spiritually it means that he is prepared to see without fear the horrific picture that unfolds before anyone who looks into the future, wanting to foresee the course of history.

**(5) How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel!:**

Tents and dwellings symbolize the organization of domestic life among the people, which is the very foundation of Jewish influence in the world.

**This verse is reminiscent of Noah's blessing to his sons:** "May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem" (Gen. 9:27). In that blessing, the concept of "tent" – that is, domestic life, human relations, and ethics – is central to Shem's lifestyle, while the concept of enlargement – external development, the capture of space, and aesthetics – is essential to the life of Japheth.<sup>71</sup> By emphasizing the significance of their tents, Balaam identifies the Jewish people as the primary heirs to the Shem line.

**(6-7) Like palm-groves that stretch out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars beside the water; their boughs drip with moisture, their roots have abundant water:** Instead of "their boughs drip with moisture," an alternate translation here is, "Water shall flow from his buckets." Water is an expression of love and of life. Water splashing over the edges of a vessel is symbolic of a level of vitality that exceeds the capabilities of the material world.

**(7) Their king:** This third prophecy relates to the future, since at the time of the blessing the Jews did not yet have a monarchy or state in the full sense.

**Their king shall rise above Agag, their kingdom shall be exalted:** The overflow of water, that is, Israel's life force, will become the basis for its political victories, which are necessary for Jewish influence upon the world. "Agag" is the generic title for the kings of Amalek, just as the Egyptians called their kings "Pharaoh," and the Philistines called their kings "Abimelech." (For such use of "Agag" as referring to an actual Amalekite king, see 1 Sam. 15.)

**Their kingdom shall be exalted:** The kingdom of Israel will be exalted by its victory over Amalek, who is the fundamental prototype of nations of the world who harbor and exhibit extreme hostility to the Jewish people (see Num. 24:20).

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<sup>71</sup> Gen. 9:27.

**(9) Blessed are they who bless you, accursed they who curse you!** As already mentioned, this is the formula of the blessing used by the Almighty Himself in His opening words to Abraham concerning the future Jewish nation and its historic mission (Gen. 12:3). By proclaiming it in the same words, Balaam completes the evolution of how he views the Jewish people.

#### § 21.6. BALAAM'S FOURTH PROPHECY (24:10-25)

וַיַּחַר-אַף בָּלָק אֶל-בַּלְעָם וַיִּסְפֹּק אֶת-כַּפָּיו וַיֹּאמֶר בָּלָק אֶל-בַּלְעָם  
 לְקַב אֵיבֵי קְרָאֲתֶיךָ וְהִגַּה בְּרַכְתָּ בְּרֹדְךָ זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים: יא וְעַתָּה בְּרַח-  
 לְךָ אֶל-מְקוֹמְךָ אֲמַרְתִּי כַבֵּד אֶכְבְּדְּךָ וְהִגַּה מִנְעֶךָ יי מִכְבוֹד: יב וַיֹּאמֶר  
 בַּלְעָם אֶל-בָּלָק הֲלֹא גַם אֶל-מְלֹאכֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר-שָׁלַחְתָּ אֵלַי דִּבַּרְתִּי  
 לֵאמֹר: יג אִם-יִתְּנֵנִי בָלָק מְלֵא בֵיתוֹ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא אוּכַל לַעֲבֹל אֶת-  
 פִּי יי לַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹבָה אוֹ רָעָה מִלְּבִי אֲשֶׁר-יִדְבַּר יי אִתּוֹ אֲדַבֵּר: יד וְעַתָּה  
 הִנְנִי הוֹלֵךְ לְעַמִּי לְכֹה אֵיעָצֶךָ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה הָעָם הַזֶּה לְעַמְּךָ בְּאַחֲרִית  
 הַיָּמִים: טו וַיֵּשֶׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר נָאִם בַּלְעָם בָּנֹו בְעֹר וְנָאִם הַגִּבֹּר  
 שְׂתֵם הָעֵיז: טז נָאִם שָׁמַע אֲמַר־יְיָ אֵל וַיִּדַע דָּעַת עֲלִיזֹן מַחֲזֵה שְׂדֵי  
 יַחֲזֵה נֶפֶל וּגְלוֹי עֵינָיִם: יז אֲרָאֲנֹו וְלֹא עַתָּה אֲשׁוּרֲנֹו וְלֹא קְרוֹב דְּרֹדְךָ  
 כּוֹכָב מֵיעֶקֶב וְקַם שְׂבָט מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וּמַחֲלֵן פְּאֲתֵי מוֹאָב וְקַרְקַר כֹּל-  
 בְּנֵי-שֵׁת: יח וְהָיָה אֲדוֹם יִרְשָׁה וְהָיָה יִרְשָׁה שְׁעִיר אֵיבֵיו וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל עָשָׂה  
 חֵיל: יט וַיִּרְדַּךְ מֵיעֶקֶב וְהָאֲבִיד שְׂרִיד מַעִיר: כ וַיִּרְא אֶת-עַמְלֶק וַיֵּשֶׂא  
 מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר רֵאשִׁית גּוֹיִם עַמְלֶק וְאַחֲרֵיתוֹ עַדִּי אֲבָד: כא וַיִּרְא אֶת-  
 הַקִּינִי וַיֵּשֶׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵיתָן מוֹשֶׁבֶד וְשֵׁים בַּסֶּלַע קַגָּד: כב כִּי אִם-  
 יִהְיֶה לְבָעַר קִזֹּו עַד-מָה אֲשׁוּר תִּשְׂבֶּד: כג וַיֵּשֶׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אוֹי מִי  
 יַחֲזֵה מִשְׁמֹו אֵל: כד וְצִים מִיַּד כְּתִים וְעָנֹו אֲשׁוּר וְעָנֹו-עֶבֶר וְגַם-הוּא  
 עַדִּי אֲבָד: כה וַיִּקַּם בַּלְעָם וַיִּלְדֹו וַיֵּשֶׁב לְמַקְוֹו וְגַם-בָּלָק הִלְךְ לְדַרְכוֹ:

(10) Enraged at Balaam, Balak struck his hands together. "I called you," Balak said to Balaam, "to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them these three times!

(11) Back with you at once to your own place! I was going to reward you richly, but the Lord has denied you the reward."

(12) Balaam replied to Balak, "But I even told the messengers you sent to me,

(13) 'Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not of my own accord do anything good or bad contrary to the Lord's command. What the Lord says, that I must say.'

(14) And now, as I go back to my people, let me inform you of what this people will do to your people in days to come."

(15) He took up his theme, and said: Word of Balaam son of Beor, word of the man whose eye is true,

(16) Word of him who hears God's speech, who obtains knowledge from the Almighty, and beholds visions from the Almighty, prostrate, but with eyes unveiled:

(17) What I see for them is not yet, what I behold will not be soon: A star rises from Jacob, a scepter comes forth from Israel; it smashes the brow of Moab, the foundation of all children of Seth.

(18) Edom becomes a possession, yea, Seir a possession of its enemies; but Israel is triumphant.

(19) A victor issues from Jacob to wipe out what is left of Ir.

(20) He saw Amalek and, taking up his theme, he said: A leading nation is Amalek; but its fate is to perish forever.

(21) He saw the Kenites and, taking up his theme, he said: Though your abode be secure, and your nest be set among cliffs,

(22) Yet shall Kain be consumed, when Asshur takes you captive.

(23) He took up his theme and said: Alas, who can survive except God has willed it!

(24) Ships come from the quarter of Kittim; they subject Asshur, subject Eber. They, too, shall perish forever.

(25) Then Balaam set out on his journey back home; and Balak also went his way.

In the course of his first three prophecies, Balaam moves each time to a different location, and his point of view likewise changes each time accordingly. But the fourth prophecy happens in the same place as the third, because it is closely related to it, and is in fact its continuation.

The fourth prophecy differs, however, in that Balaam prophesies this time at his own initiative, having now freed himself from Balak's influence, and his order to solve actual problems of the here and now. Balaam's fourth prophecy speaks not of the current state of affairs, but of the global influence of the Jewish people in the distant future. For that reason there is a markedly vague character to this prophecy, which presents only a vague image of the events it is predicting.

As compared with the first three prophecies, the fourth one describes a different system – the relationship between the Jewish nation and the peoples of the world. In the earlier prophecies, which pertained to Israel's past and present, the Jews are “a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations.” But in the future, on the contrary, the Jewish people will be united with the rest of humanity into a single complex.

The fourth prophecy describes the global triumph of the Jewish approach. It is particularly important that this kind of prophecy be heard not from Moses or some other Jewish prophet (whose viewpoint could be suspected of reflecting a Jewish bias), but through Balaam, who is actually hostile to the Jewish people. This point significantly enhances the influence of Balaam's prophecy upon all of humanity.

**(10-11) Enraged at Balaam, Balak struck his hands together. ... Balak said to Balaam, “Back with you at once to your own place!”:** The third prophecy angers Balak, but also frightens him. After Balaam addressed the Jewish people with the declaration, “Blessed are they who bless you, accursed they who curse you!” (Num. 24:9), Balak feared that Balaam might now curse *him* as the initiator of a curse upon the Jews. But in fact, this is exactly what happens. The fourth prophecy of Balaam speaks of Moab's destruction.

**(12-13) Balaam replied to Balak, “But I even told the messengers you sent to me, ‘... I could not of my own accord do anything good or bad contrary to the Lord's command. What the Lord says, that I must say’:** Here it turns out that Balak's messengers, who understood the situation in the manner that he himself did (i.e., that a more generous inducement will fix the problem and compel Balaam to come), gave Balak an incorrect account of Balaam's motives (“... the Lord will not let me go with you,” see Num. 22:13). They simply

told Balak: "Balaam refused to come with us" (Num. 22:14), completely obscuring the real reason for Balaam's refusal.

**(14) And now, as I go back to my people, let me inform you of what this people will do to your people in days to come**: The Hebrew here is *be-acharit ha-yamim*, literally "at the end of days." This term signifies the completion of a given phase of history. (Cf. Gen. 4:3, 49:1. While the Hebrew in those two verses is completely different—*miqqetz yamim* vs. *be-acharit ha-yamim*—most English translations of Torah use "at the end of days" for both). From the Jewish perspective it refers primarily to the end of the long and terrible exile and the return to the Land of Israel.

**Let me inform you of what this people will do to your people in days to come**: The Hebrew, translated here as "Let me inform you" is *i`atzecha*, would be rendered more literally as "Let me advise you." The common Hebrew word *`etzah*, which is the noun that derives from the same verbal root, can mean either "advice" or "design" (in the sense of "scheme"). Thus, our verse here could be understood more literally, as "Let me advise you," or it could also imply "Let me tell you about the Almighty's design, i.e., plan."

The Midrash believes that this "advice" that Balaam gave Balak was to seduce the Jews into debauchery and idolatry through the women of Midian, as described in the next section. The fact that it was Balaam who was behind that plan is made clear later: "Yet [these women] are the very ones who, at the bidding of Balaam, induced the Israelites to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor" (31:16). However, according to the straightforward meaning of the verse here, when Balaam says he will advise (inform) Balak, or that he will explain the Almighty's plans, he is referring to his fourth prophecy that immediately follows.

In the fourth prophecy, which speaks of future world history, other nations are mentioned not so much *per se* as for what each represents—as symbols of their various models of behavior and their relationships with the Jewish people. But at the same time, Moab is singled out in particular, and Balaam thus enables Balak to build a correct strategy for Moab; namely, if Moab behaves like Kenites and maintains friendly

relations with Israel, they will survive and be preserved. But should Moab harm Israel, they will be crushed like Amalek.

We can also combine the two approaches, “advice” and “design,” as follows. Balaam’s advice consisted merely in describing the situation. And on that basis Moab and the Midianites should have understood on their own that in order for the Jewish people to be destroyed, they would have to be seduced.

It is important to note that throughout his first three prophecies, Balaam never speaks spontaneously; rather, he only mouths the words that the Almighty directs him to say. But in the fourth prophecy, Balaam receives no orders from God. He utters the fourth prophecy entirely on his own initiative, describing how he understands the world, and therefore also bearing full responsibility for what he expresses. And since this prophecy will reveal to Balak a path to attacking Israel, it is Balaam who must shoulder the blame for that.

The message here is that not in every situation should the Jews reveal to their enemies their understanding of the world, even when that understanding is correct. The Midrash famously states that when Jacob upon his deathbed wished to reveal the “end of days” to his sons, God would not permit him to do so (see the *Bible Dynamics* commentary on Gen. 49:1). The Midrash goes on to explain, with particular emphasis, that it is very often inappropriate to reveal the end times to the general population, and that doing so will often do more harm than good.

**(15-16) He took up his theme, and said: Word of Balaam ... who obtains knowledge from the Almighty:** Balaam repeats the praises that he spoke when introducing the third prophecy (Num. 24:3), but here he adds, “who obtains knowledge from the Almighty” (literally, “who knows the knowledge of the Almighty”). This addition is related to the eschatological character of the fourth prophecy, which by its nature requires not only understanding the current situation, but also knowing what the Almighty is planning for the future. Moreover, Balaam has knowledge of the Almighty in the sense that his prophecy is indeed true. That is, Balaam’s prophetic power is enormous.

**(17) What I see for them is not yet, what I behold will not be soon:** The influence of the Jewish people on humanity is a very

long-term process, since it occurs through cultural change and change of mentality, not merely political change, which in general happens much more quickly.

**A star rises from Jacob, a scepter comes forth from Israel:** The coming of the Messiah – “a star rises from Jacob” – is associated with the restoration of the Jewish state, which is what “a scepter comes forth from Israel” refers to. The realization of the Messiah’s spiritual objectives derives from his political attainments. Only after the Jewish people have achieved a sound political life can they exert a genuine, abiding influence on the world.

**It smashes ... the foundation of all children of Seth:** The descendants of Seth, Adam’s third son, are all of humanity. In other words, Jewish spiritual influence will dominate the entire world. (Adam and Eve had three sons: Cain, Abel, and Seth. Abel had no progeny and was murdered by Cain, whereas Cain’s descendants all perished in the Deluge. Thus, the entire population of the world since then are the descendants of Seth through Noah, and “all the children of Seth” in this verse therefore means all of humankind.)

**It smashes the brow of Moab:** It might seem strange that Moab is suddenly singled out within this global context. But the reason is that besides being a prophecy about the future of mankind, this is also a picture meant for Balak, the king of Moab and the driver of the entire cursing initiative.

But moreover, the special importance of Moab, a tiny people, within the fate of all of mankind is also rooted in Moab’s critical role in the Messianic process. The Davidic dynasty was founded through Ruth the Moabite (Ruth 4:17, 22), which means that the Messiah, a scion of the house of David, descends from Moab. Thus, the Messiah roots are not only in Israel but in all the nations of the world, through Moab. At the moment of this prophecy Moab could not be attacked, for the very reason that Ruth was still to descend from Moab. But later, when that spark has already been extracted from Moab, they will lose that protection, and if they do not change their attitude of hostility toward the Jews, they face annihilation.

**(18) Edom becomes a possession, yea, Seir a possession of its enemies; but Israel is triumphant:** In the narrow sense, Edom is

just the small nation of the Edomites. But in the global sense, Edom represents all of Roman civilization, and thus, later, the entire Western world. Israel must first defeat the small nation of Edom. But in the next go-around it must establish its spiritual dominance within all of Western civilization.

**(19) A victor issues from Jacob to wipe out what is left of Ir:** *Ir* is a common Hebrew word that means “city.” Therefore, *ir* in this verse can also be translated generically: “To wipe out what is left of the city,” which we can understand to mean Rome, the greatest city of the ancient Western world.

Not by mere happenstance does Roman civilization derive its name from the name of the city, for Rome is both of those. But the influence of the Jewish people will so dominate that from all of Rome not a single “Roman” will remain, as it were.

**(20) He saw Amalek and, taking up his theme, he said: A leading nation is Amalek; but its fate is to perish forever:** Amalek, “the leading nation,” is the very root and archetype of all hostility towards the Jews among the peoples of the world – their refusal to accept the light of the Almighty, whose bearer is Israel. This is symbolically expressed in the fact that Amalek was way ahead of all other nations in attacking the Jewish people, which they did immediately after the Exodus from Egypt (Exod. 17:8). But if Amalek is destined for annihilation, why does it even exist at all?

Amalek is needed in the initial period of world history to serve as an antipode to Jewish influence on the world. Israel brings the world closer to God, while Amalek distances the world from God. At first the world cannot exist without Amalek, just as the Earth, if it were allowed to get too close to the sun, would simply burn up. Two opposing forces are therefore needed. The Jewish people attract humankind to the Divine light, while Amalek repels humanity from it.

In the end times, however, Amalek will be completely destroyed – as this verse says, “its fate is to perish forever” – because once all of humanity has risen to the level of direct conversation with God, the repulsion formerly provided by Amalek will be no longer needed, and neither will Amalek, which has no spiritual right of its own to exist.

**(21-22) He saw the Kenites and, taking up his theme, he said:**

Though your abode be secure, and your nest be set among cliffs, yet shall Kain be consumed, when Asshur takes you captive: The Kenites are the descendants of Jethro (today's Druze are of that ancestry). The Kenites later lived in the Land of Israel (Jud. 1, 4), and from the account of the wars waged by Saul we know that they lived in close proximity to Amalek, and even in their midst (1 Sam. 15:6).

But unlike Amalek, the Kenites were quite friendly to the Jews and were therefore saved. Thus, even dispersed among the Amalekite people there exist distinct groups who are very different from them and can live peacefully with the Jewish people. At a critical moment they are saved by departing from Amalek and transitioning to the side of Israel.

**(22) Yet shall Kain be consumed, when Asshur takes you captive:** The Kenites, because they cast their lot with the Jewish people, will not perish even during the Assyrian conquest that will destroy so many of the peoples of the region. The Kenites will be able to return from the Assyrian captivity.

The fate of the Kenites people is contrasted here with the fate of Amalek. Thus, Balaam is offering Moab a choice between two alternatives: "You can be saved like the Kenites, or perish to a man like Amalek."

**(23) He took up his theme and said: Alas, who can survive except God has willed it!: This is said at the global, not the individual level:** when huge empires conquer this region and resettle its population elsewhere, virtually no nation will manage to survive. They will assimilate and disappear.

**(24) Ships come from the quarter of Kittim; they subject Asshur, subject Eber. They, too, shall perish forever:** Kittim (Cyprus; see also Gen. 10:4) is a Greco-Roman civilization that will spread its influence to the east, and subdue it. But it too will eventually perish, and the spiritual leadership will pass to Israel.

**(25) Then Balaam set out on his journey back home; and Balak also went his way:** We will subsequently learn that on his way back to Pethor whence he had come, Balaam tarried in Midian, where he was killed during the war that Israel waged upon the Midianites (Num. 31)

## § 22. THE ATTEMPT TO DEBAUCH ISRAEL

### § 22.1. THE ISRAELITES ARE SEDUCED BY THE DAUGHTERS OF MOAB AND MIDIAN (25:1-6)

א, וישב ישראל בשטים ויחל העם לזנות אל-בנות מואב: ב ותקראן לעם לזבחי אלהיהן ויאכל העם וישתחוו לאלהיהן: ג ויצמד ישראל לבעל פעור ויחר-אף יי בישראל: ד ויאמר יי אל-משה קח את-כל-ראשי העם והוקע אותם ליי נגד השמש וישב חרון אף-יי מישראל: ה ויאמר משה אל-שפטי ישראל הרגו איש אנשיו הנצמדים לבעל פעור: ו והנה איש מבני ישראל בא ויקרב אל-אחיו את-המדינית לעיני משה ולעיני כל-עדת בני-ישראל והמה בכים פתח אהל מועד:

- (1) While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women,
- (2) Who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. The people partook of them and worshiped that god.
- (3) Thus Israel attached itself to Baal-peor, and the Lord was incensed with Israel.
- (4) The Lord said to Moses, "Take all the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before the Lord, so that the Lord's wrath may turn away from Israel."
- (5) So Moses said to Israel's officials, "Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor."

**(6) Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community who were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.**

**(1) While Israel was staying at Shittim:** Literally, “Israel abode in Shittim.” The word *va-yeshuv*, “stay,” most often denotes a permanent stay, settling down for an extended period. Thus, the use of this verb here at first seems strange, since the people were on their way to the Promised Land, and had all but reached it in fact, needing only to cross the Jordan westward. They certainly had no intention of remaining on the river’s east bank.

However, *va-yeshuv* here reflects the mood that has arisen among the Israelites. No sooner has suitable territory been conquered, than proposals begin to spread among the people to settle on it and abandon any plans of further conquests. This premature sense of having achieved one’s goals is destructive.

In principle, the east bank of the Jordan should also have become a part of the Land of Israel, but only as an annexed region, not as an integral part of the main territory. The geographical nexus of Israel’s holiness is in the erstwhile lands of Canaan. Other territories can be annexed only after Canaan has been conquered.

**The people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women:** Marrying the daughters of the indigenous population is a typical practice when seizing and settling new territory, and is seen as an effective means of “reinforcing rootedness” in the new land. (This consideration can be seen as having motivated Judah’s decision to marry a Canaanite woman; see Gen. 38:2 and the *Bible Dynamics* commentary there.)

But on the other hand, Israel’s conquest and possession of the Land of Israel was by no means an ordinary occupation, and conventional practices were therefore not appropriate in this case. This incident involving the daughters of Moab and Midian was intended to help the Jewish people understand and acknowledge that difference.

**(1-2) The people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women, who invited the people to the sacrifices for their**

**god:** The objective of this depravity was to draw Israel into idolatry. The Torah itself states clearly that this temptation is the basis for the prohibition of intermarrying with the inhabitants of the Canaanite lands: “You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the Lord’s anger will blaze forth against you and He will promptly wipe you out” (Deut. 7:3-4).

And even more explicitly: “You must not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for they will lust after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and invite you, and you will eat of their sacrifices. And when you take wives from among their daughters for your sons, their daughters will lust after their gods and will cause your sons to lust after their gods” (Exod. 34:15-16).

Later (Num. 31:16) we will learn that this seduction was a well-planned action, but that detail is not mentioned here, because superficially everything appeared to follow a “natural” course. Only after the fact will it come to light that there was a calculated conspiracy to destroy the Jewish nation. Thus we see that even curses and open warfare are not all that harmful to the Jewish people, whereas temptation and seduction are far more dangerous for them.

**(2-3) ... who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. The people partook of them and worshiped that god. Thus Israel attached itself to Baal-peor:** The literal meaning of *peor* is “unrest” or “licentiousness.” As noted above, the worship of the Baal-peor cult consisted in liberating the basest, crudest human instincts.

And the Lord was incensed with Israel: God’s wrath manifested in a plague that afflicted the Jewish nation (as Num. 25:8-9 make clear).

**(4) The Lord said to Moses, “Take all the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before the Lord”:** The Hebrew, *rashei ha`am*, means, simply, the heads (i.e., leaders) of the people. The straightforward meaning is that those leaders are to be executed because they could not restrain the people, and are therefore held responsible for what is happening. It is also possible that many of the tribal leaders were in fact themselves involved in the seduction. Zimri, a chieftain of the Simeonites, is a prime example (as we shall soon see).

But – as the translation here has it, “ringleaders” – we can also interpret *rashei ha`am* to mean the instigators of the idolatry, whom the judges are mandated to execute because they have become “leaders” to the people in this particular incident by leading the people into sin.

**Publicly:** Literally, “opposite the sun.” That is (as the translation here makes explicit), execute them openly and publicly – as a deterrent, to discourage the people from sinning any further.

**(5) So Moses said to Israel’s officials, “Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor”:** Moses orders the officials to punish only those who have “attached themselves” to the idolatry, but makes no mention of executing “the leaders of the people.”

That is, Moses’ order is essentially less harsh than that of the Almighty (or Moses chooses to interpret God’s ambiguous order more leniently). Nor does the Torah inform us whether the execution of even the more lenient order had begun. We only know that even if it had, it had no effect until Phinehas intervened (Num. 25:7-8).

**(6) Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions:** Later, after the fact (25:15), the Torah reports that this Israelite, here unnamed, was Zimri, a chieftain of the tribe of Simon. And the Midianite woman was Cozbi, daughter of one of the five Midianite kings. But here their names are not specified. That is, to the ordinary spectators it seemed like just a spontaneous outburst of debauchery. The Torah will inform us only later that Midian’s leadership was involved in this incident, and that it was a premeditated action to destroy Israel.

**Came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions:** Earlier (Num. 25:1) we read, “The people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women.” But here the culprit is not a Moabite woman, but a Midianite. The apparent explanation is that the Moabite women worked the common people, while the Midianite women were engaged in seducing the upper classes.

**Came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community:** The emphasis here on “in the sight of Moses and of the whole community”

suggests that Zimri was committing this act not only openly, but also deliberately and demonstratively.

**The Midrash explains that Zimri addressed the people as follows:** “Idolatry is of course a serious transgression, but it is happening in this case only because the Israelites, in order to find girls, are forced to go to the Moabite and Midianite camps, where they are subject to idolatrous influences. The solution is to bring the girls back to our camp instead. Problem solved! But as for cohabiting with Midianite women, surely there is nothing wrong in that, seeing that even Moses himself has a Midianite wife.”

Needless to say there was no true analogy here, since Moses’ wife Zipporah came from the family of the monotheist Jethro, and thus in Moses’ marriage to her there was not the slightest tinge or suspicion of idolatry. But even so, Zimri was able to influence the people with such demagoguery.

**Who were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting:** Moses is confused and at a loss to know what to do. His order to execute those who have attached themselves to idolatry is not being implemented, apparently because the members of the tribal leadership are themselves involved in the debauchery. All this means that the entire system of governance that Moses had developed early on, and which has served him well for forty years in the wilderness, has now broken down, and requires a complete overhaul. Moses is unable to do that, and is therefore perplexed.

#### § 22.2. PHINEHAS TAKES ACTION (25:7-9)

וַיֵּרָא פִּינְחָס בֶּן־אֱלֶעָזָר בֶּן־אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וַיָּקָם מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה וַיִּקַּח  
 רֶמֶחַ בְּיָדוֹ: הֵיבִיא אַחֵר אִישׁ־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־הַקְּבָה וַיִּדְקַר אֶת־שְׁנֵיהֶם  
 אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־הָאִשָּׁה אֶל־קְבַתָּהּ וַתַּעֲצֹר הַמַּגִּפָּה מֵעַל בְּנֵי  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל: ט וַיִּהְיוּ הַמֵּתִים בַּמַּגִּפָּה אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים אָלֶף:

(7) When Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand,

**(8) He followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was checked.**

**(9) Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand.**

**(7) When Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, saw this:** This is now the third generation, the grandchildren of the Israelites who left Egypt.

**When Phinehas ... saw this:** The word “this” has been added here by the translator. It does not appear in the Hebrew, which says only that “Phinehas saw.”

What, then, did Phinehas see? He saw the inability of the leadership to cope with the problem. In this kind of situation, only younger, more determined leaders can save the nation.

**He left the assembly:** This expression reveals what motivated Phinehas’ actions: ye is guided not only by Torah law, but by his natural, socio-nationalistic sense of belonging to the community. In a critical situation, a spontaneous popular movement is more important than a formalized halachah, an established principle of Jewish law.

**(8) He followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly:** There was no point in opposing Zimri’s arguments. The situation could be resolved only by an immediate display of force.

**He followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them ... through the belly:** Three phonetically similar Hebrew words play a role this incident, the first two of which appear in this verse itself:

- (i) *kubbah*, “chamber” (or “tent, alcove, niche”)
- (ii) *keivah*, “belly” (or, more correctly here, “womb”)
- (iii) *K-B-H*, “curse” (as a verb).

The connection of the third of those words to the current context lies in the fact that *K-B-H*, meaning “to curse,” appears multiple times in the story of Balaam and Balak in the immediately preceding

chapters (Num. 22:11,17; 23:8). It is Balaam's influence that has led to this entire seduction episode.

Thus, Phinehas' action here – entering the chamber and stabbing the perpetrators through the belly – highlights the connection between all these aspects of the problem.

**Then the plague against the Israelites was checked:** The Almighty here confirms the correctness of Phinehas' actions. In fact, it was he who implemented the Almighty's instruction to "take the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before the Lord."

**(9) Those who died of the plague:** The end-result was that those who had worshiped Baal-peor were not executed by the judges, but perished in the plague.

**Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand:** In the incident of the golden calf only three thousand died (Exod. 32:28). But here – eight times that number. Because the Israelites have already approached the Land of Israel and must now be ready for conquest, the demands on them are now much higher, and they have a far greater responsibility to uphold the strictest moral principles.

**WEEKLY  
PORTION 8**

**PINCHAS**



## § 23. THE AFTERMATH OF THE SEDUCTION

### § 23.1. PHINEHAS RECEIVES THE COVENANT OF PRIESTHOOD (25:10-15)

וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֱלֹהִים לְמֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: יֵאֱפִינְחֶם בְּזֶלְעָזָר בְּזֶאֱהָרֹן הַכֹּהֵן  
הַשֵּׁיב אֶת־חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת־קִנְאָתִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְלֹא־  
כִּלִּיתִי אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאָתִי: יב לָכֵן אֶמְרָה הַנְּנִי נִתְּנָן לּוֹ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי  
שְׁלוֹם: יג וְהִיְתָה לּוֹ וּלְזֶרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו בְּרִית כְּהֵנָּה עוֹלָם תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר קִנְאָה  
לְאֵלֹהֵיו וַיִּכַּפֵּר עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: יד וְשֵׁם אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמְּכַה אֲשֶׁר הִכָּה  
אֶת־הַמִּדְיָנִית זִמְרִי בֶן־סֻלּוֹא נְשִׂיא בֵּית־אָב לְשִׁמְעֹנִי: טו וְשֵׁם הָאִשָּׁה  
הַמְּכָה הַמִּדְיָנִית כְּזָבִי בַת־צֹר רֹאשׁ אֲמוֹת בֵּית־אָב בְּמִדְיָן הוּא:

(10) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying,

(11) “Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion.

(12) Say, therefore, ‘I grant him My pact of friendship.

(13) It shall be for him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time, because he took impassioned action for his God, thus making expiation for the Israelites.’”

(14) The name of the Israelite who was killed, the one who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri son of Salu, chieftain of a Simeonite ancestral house.

(15) **The name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi daughter of Zur; he was the tribal head of an ancestral house in Midian.**

(11) **“Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest:** The Torah’s account of Phinehas’ actions and their consequences is spread across two weekly portions, *Balak* (just concluded), and *Pinchas* (which begins here). That is, the sages who established the beginning and end of each weekly portion saw fit to divide Phinehas’ story between two portions. And the reason is, that although it is all one story, its two parts reflect two different themes.

The first part of the story (the account of the seduction itself and Phinehas’ reaction to it) describes the relationship of the Jewish people to Midian and Moab. The second part relates to the structure of the Jewish nation at the end of their forty-year journey through the wilderness, which is also the general theme of this weekly portion, *Pinchas*.

The second part shows that the underlying meaning of the story is not only about crime and punishment. Rather, it reveals Moses’ inability to stand up to the nation’s leaders when they commit wrongful acts. When the incumbent leaders, Moses and Aaron, cannot stem the epidemic, Phinehas, who represents the new generation of leadership, steps in, and easily copes with the task.

**Has turned back My wrath from the Israelites:** The people were so shocked by the killing of Zimri that they immediately desisted from their debauchery and idolatry. And this turned back the wrath of the Almighty.

**By displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion:** “Passion” here in the Hebrew is *kin’ah*, of which the literal meaning is “jealousy.” (Indeed, an alternate translation here is, “in that he was very jealous for My sake among them, so that I consumed not the children of Israel in My jealousy.”) *Kin’ah* is the quality exemplified by Phinehas, and which the Torah speaks of here as an attribute of the Divine. The essence of *kin’ah* is refusal to be reconciled to a heinous crime.

However, when a person acts on the basis of this attribute, his action, although infused with the spirit of a highly compelling principle, lives at the very edge of the law, as it were. In this instance, it was completely unclear whether Zimri had even committed any actual crime (after all, he was not directly involved in idolatry; he only brought forth a Midianite woman and fornicated with her). It was therefore all the more unclear that it was permissible for Phinehas to punish Zimri with death.

Of course, Phinehas made the absolutely correct and life-saving decision in this situation, although the approach that he adopted is quite dangerous overall, and the Talmud therefore says that “jealousy (i.e., zealousness) must not be taught.” But it is important to understand that at critical moments, when the normal systems of power and justice suddenly become inadequate and ineffective, only such jealousy can redeem the situation. And in this consists the profound rationale for the existence and application of such “jealousy” in the life of a healthy society.

**(12) Say, therefore, ‘I grant him My pact of friendship’:** The Midrash explains that Phinehas needed God’s help and protection, because Zimri’s numerous influential relatives were on the verge of attacking him. The Almighty therefore had to step in to protect Phinehas.

But the straightforward meaning of this “pact of friendship” is that it is contrasted here with military actions, and with murder specifically. A zealot sits precariously on the very edge of the law, and is always in danger of crossing the line. God’s “pact of friendship” with Phinehas is designed to protect him in the future from any wrong moves.

Literally, *Et beriti shalom* (here translated as “My pact of friendship”) means “My covenant of peace.” Peace is the reward that Phinehas receives here for his zealousness. Zealous behavior is sometimes indispensable in critical situations, but it should not be a guiding principle in the normal life of human society. Peace (in Hebrew, *shalom*, which means “integrity”) is the balance needed in everyday life after a critical situation has passed. God’s “covenant of peace” here is comparable to a situation where a soldier who has just returned from the front must leave his belligerent behaviors behind and re-adapt

himself to the norms of peaceful civilian life,. This is the essence of the covenant that the Almighty is granting here to Phinehas.

**(13) It shall be for him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time:** The priesthood, which was given to Aaron, and to his sons who were anointed with him (Exod. 28:40), automatically extended also to all of their descendants born after that anointing. But because Phinehas had been born earlier, he initially did not have the status of a priest, and he receives it only now, after killing Zimri.

**For him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time:** Ordinary priesthood is also “for all time”; that is, it extends to all descendants. Thus, the words “for him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time” must mean something more than just the ordinary status of a *kohen*. Accordingly, we can understand these words as conferring a special kind of priesthood; namely, the status of a High Priest. Indeed, we see that in future Jewish history almost all the *kohanim gedolim*, the High Priests, were descendants of Phinehas.

**A pact of priesthood ... because he took impassioned action for his God:** Phinehas demonstrated zeal for the sake of the Jewish people, which is here called “impassioned action for his God.”

**(14) The name of the Israelite who was killed, the one who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri son of Salu, chieftain of a Simeonites ancestral house:** The names of the perpetrators were not originally stated. Only here are we informed that the tribal leaders were involved. Thus, Phinehas’ zealotry is expressed not only in the murder of an initiator of the debauchery, but in the fact that he was not afraid to step over the social hierarchy in order to accomplish what he needed to do.

As the wilderness era draws to a close, not only the national leadership must change, but the leadership of the individual tribes as well. And since Moses, although he got along with the leaders of the tribes during the wilderness wanderings, did not have the resolve to effect such a replacement, it needed to happen in the form of a “violent revolution” carried out by Phinehas.

**Chieftain of a Simeonite ancestral house:** Later, when the principle of “separation of powers” (Deut. 16, 17) is introduced into

the structure of the Jewish nation, the power of the executive branch must be balanced by the other branches, and by the Temple and the priesthood in particular. The Temple leadership must therefore include people who are not afraid to speak out against the national leaders (initially these are the heads of the tribes, and later – the kings). This is precisely the ability that Phinehas has now demonstrated, and this quality must be reinforced for posterity.

**(15) The name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi daughter of Zur; he was the tribal head of an ancestral house in Midian:** Zur is one of the five Midianite kings mentioned later (Num. 31:8). As already noted, in the first part of the story, in which only the visible outline of events is given, the entire incident was presented as just a typical problem that arose in the natural flow of everyday life. Only in this second part of the story do we learn that the episode was actually a conspiracy planned at the level of the Midianite leadership.

§ 23.2. THE ORDER TO GO TO BATTLE WITH MIDIAN  
(25:16-18)

טו וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: יז צְרֹר אֶת־הַמְּדִינִים וְהַכִּיתֶם  
אוֹתָם: יח כִּי צָרְרִים הֵם לָכֶם בְּנִקְלֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר־נִבְּלוּ לָכֶם עַל־דְּבַר־  
פְּעֹזֹר וְעַל־דְּבַר כְּזָבִי בַת־נְשִׂיא מִדְיָן אֲחֹתָם הַמְּכָה בְיוֹם־הַמַּגֵּפָה עַל־  
דְּבַר־פְּעֹזֹר:

א וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַמַּגֵּפָה

**(16) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying,**

**(17) “Assail the Midianites and defeat them –**

**(18) for they assailed you by the trickery they practiced against you – because of the affair of Peor and because of the affair of their kinswoman Cozbi, daughter of the Midianite chieftain, who was killed at the time of the plague on account of Peor.”**

**(26:1) When the plague was over,**

**(16-17) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Assail the Midianites and defeat them –”:** Moses is commanded to wage war against the Midianites himself. This war is mentioned later as God’s final order to Moses: “Avenge the Israelite people on the Midianites; then you shall be gathered to your kin” (Num. 31:2).

**(17-18) “Assail the Midianites and defeat them – for they assailed you by the trickery they practiced against you – because of the affair of Peor and because of the affair of their kinswoman Cozbi ...at the time of the plague on account of Peor”:** Since Midian was the initiator of the seduction of the Jewish nation, and of the attempt to destroy them through debauchery and idolatry – it was Midian who had to be punished, not Moab.

As noted earlier, Israel was forbidden to attack Moab, Ammon, and Edom, because they are consanguineous relatives of the Jewish people. But the Midianites too are Israel’s relatives, being the descendants of one of Abraham’s sons from Keturah (Gen. 25:1-2). And yet, Israel is allowed – indeed here commanded – to wage war against them. And against Amalek too, yet another relative (Gen. 36:12).

We can explain this as follows. Although Israel was forbidden to attack related peoples, self-defense and retaliation were allowed. Amalek’s unprovoked act of aggression against the Jewish people immediately after the Exodus was clearly a military attack. Midian’s aggression, on the other hand, was ideological, motivated by incitement to idolatry, but that too is considered no less of an attack, and demands full retaliation. Indeed, Moab too participated in that “ideological attack,” but they are not punished, because, as also already noted, Moab’s fears were natural (even if not justified), given that the Israelites were situated close by, while Midian came from afar, projecting themselves into a conflict that never concerned them in the first place. That is, they took the initiative in their attack on Israel.

**(18) For they assailed you by the trickery they practiced against you – because of the affair of Peor and because of the affair of ... Cozbi: An alternate translation is:** “For they harass you, by their wives, and they have beguiled you in the affair of Peor, and of Cozbi.” Thus there are two parts to the accusation. The second part (“they have you beguiled in the affair of Peor, and of Cozbi”), refers to the seduction. But the first part, which is less clear, would need to be

attributed to something else – to Balaam’s invitation, evidently. And this means that Midian too was an instigator.

**(17) “Assail the Midianites and defeat them – ... (26:1) When the plague was over ...:** In the middle of this verse we see an abrupt change of theme. Although the order to wage war on Midian was given immediately after the plague, and as a reaction to it, that order did not say that the war should be carried out immediately.

Instead, before that war actually begins, many other passages are inserted into the text – five whole chapters (Num. 26-30) in fact – that seem out of place here, covering a variety of topics. These are: a new census of the tribes of Israel; the legal suit brought by the daughters of Zelophehad concerning their right to inherit their father’s estate; Moses’ last days and the appointment of Joshua to succeed him; a lengthy description of the daily and festival sacrifices; and, finally, an enumeration of laws relating to vows. Only after all that does the Torah resume its account of Israel’s war against Midian.

Common to all those intervening digressions is the theme of entering the Land of Israel. This common theme can be seen in the replacement of leadership, preparation for war, inheritance of the land, vows, and also in the daily sacrifices, which underscore the need to maintain a constant connection with the Almighty in the Land of Israel.

Another common theme uniting these passages is the question of the relationship between commands received from Above and self-motivated initiative from below. It is the same problem that has already manifested in the Phinehas episode, and will soon again, in the matter of the women who want to participate in inheriting the Land.

The purpose of this interruption – that is, the fact that the Torah mentions the war with Midian here, notwithstanding that the war itself will happen only later – is to emphasize that the war with Midian has two distinct aspects. It is Israel’s revenge on Midian, but in parallel to that it serves also to correct internal flaws among the people.

Initially, this war is described as an immediate reaction to an attack that must be avenged. But later, the same war is mentioned as a task that Moses is commanded to perform as one of his final acts. In other words, from this perspective the war on Midian is an aspect of Moses’ leadership of the nation.

## § 24. A NATIONAL CENSUS, APPORTIONMENT OF THE LAND, AND TRANSFER OF POWER

### § 24.1. THE COMMANDMENT TO CONDUCT A CENSUS

(26:1-4)

וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן־אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן לֵאמֹר: ב שְׂאוּ אֶת־  
רֹאשׁ | כָּל־עֵדֶת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה לְבֵית אָבֹתָם  
כָּל־יֵצֵא צָבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל: ג וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה וְאֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן אֹתָם בְּעֵרְבַת  
מוֹאָב עַל־יַרְדֵּן יְרֵחוֹ לֵאמֹר: ד מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה כָּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי  
אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַיֵּצְאִים מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

(1) ... the Lord said to Moses and to Eleazar son of Aaron the priest,

(2) "Take a census of the whole Israelite community from the age of twenty years up, by their ancestral houses, all Israelites able to bear arms."

(3) So Moses and Eleazar the priest, on the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho, gave instructions about them, namely,

(4) those from twenty years up, as the Lord had commanded Moses. The descendants of the Israelites who came out of the land of Egypt were:

(2) **“Take a census of the whole Israelite community”**: The purpose of this census is to prepare for the apportionment of the Land of Israel, seeing that the wilderness journey is now complete.

It is highly instructive to compare the results of this census with those of the initial census that was conducted one year after the Exodus (at the very beginning of this book of *Bemidbar*, Numbers; see Num. 1:1 ff.). That comparison shows us the dynamics in the population change of each tribe, which directly reflects the degree of success of each tribe in surmounting its difficulties during the wilderness wanderings, as we shall explain in detail.

In this sense, then, we can view this weekly portion 8, *Pinchas*, as essentially the final portion of the book of Numbers. For although weekly portions 9, *Mattot* and 10, *Mas‘ei* are still yet to follow, we can see the content of those two portions as merely “filling in the blanks” of topics whose coverage in this *Pinchas* portion was postponed until later. (The most notable example of that is the war with Midian, as already explained.)

(3) **On the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho**: The reference to Jericho, here and below, emphasizes that from this point on, and until the very end of the Torah, all events are occurring on the eve of the conquest of the land, and with that conquest already on the horizon, both literally and figuratively.

(2, 4) **Take a census of ... those from twenty years up, as the Lord had commanded Moses. The descendants of the Israelites who came out of the land of Egypt were ...**: The enumeration that begins here is recorded family by family – the “families” of Israel, whose founders are considered to be the “seventy souls” (i.e., persons), including Jacob, who descended with him from Canaan to Egypt (Gen. 46:27).

There are minor differences (some ten discrepancies in all) between the list given there of the names of the persons who arrived in Egypt, vs. the list of “families” given here. This is because some families ceased to exist in Egypt, and some changed their names. (The classical Torah commentaries enumerate and explicate all the discrepancies in detail, but we will not dwell on them in this *Bible Dynamics* commentary.)

That first generation of seventy persons enjoyed a privileged status in Egypt, because they were close relatives of Joseph, who was

second-in-command to Pharaoh. They therefore became the founders of the families of the Jewish nation. This same structure was preserved throughout the two centuries of Egyptian bondage leading up to the Exodus, and then for the entire forty years of wilderness wanderings.

Moreover, the territories of the Land of Israel will likewise be apportioned according to this same list of families. This system symbolically emphasizes the aspect of the “return” of this people to their land: a small group had left Canaan for Egypt. Each of those persons has now grown into a large family that has returned to occupy its place in the land.

#### § 24.2. THE SOUTHERN CAMP – REUBEN, SIMON, AND GAD (26:5-4)

ה ראובן בכור ישראל בני ראובן חנוך משפחת החנכי לפלוא משפחת הפלאי: ו לחצרון משפחת החצרוני לכרמי משפחת הכרמי: ז אלה משפחת הראובני ויהיו פקדיהם שלשה וארבעים אלף ושבע מאות ושלשים: ח ובני פלוא אליאב: ט ובני אליאב נמואל ודתן ואבירם הוא דתן ואבירם קרואי (קריאי) העדה אשר הצו על-משה ועל-אהרן בעדת-קרח בהצתם עליי: י ותפתח הארץ את-פיה ותבלע אתם ואת-קרח במות העדה באכל האש את חמשים ומאתים איש ויהיו לגם: יא ובני-קרח לא-מתו:

יב בני שמעון למשפחתם נמואל משפחת הנמואלי לימין משפחת הימיני ליבין משפחת היכיני: יג לזרח משפחת הזרחי לשאול משפחת השאולי: יד אלה משפחת השמעני שנים ועשרים אלף ומאתים:

טו בני גד למשפחתם לצפון משפחת הצפוני לחגי משפחת החגי לשוני משפחת השוני: טז לאזני משפחת האזני לערי משפחת הערי: יז לארוד משפחת הארודי לאראלי משפחת האראלי: יח אלה משפחת בני-גד לפקדיהם ארבעים אלף וחמש מאות:

- (5) **Reuben, Israel's first-born. Descendants of Reuben: [Of] Enoch, the clan of the Enochites; of Pallu, the clan of the Palluites;**
- (6) **of Hezron, the clan of the Hezronites; of Carmi, the clan of the Carmites.**
- (7) **Those are the clans of the Reubenites. The persons enrolled came to 43,730.**
- (8) **Born to Pallu: Eliab.**
- (9) **The sons of Eliab were Nemuel, and Dathan and Abiram. These are the same Dathan and Abiram, chosen in the assembly, who agitated against Moses and Aaron as part of Korah's band when they agitated against the Lord.**
- (10) **Whereupon the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with Korah – when that band died, when the fire consumed the two hundred and fifty men – and they became an example.**
- (11) **The sons of Korah, however, did not die.**
- (12) **Descendants of Simeon by their clans: Of Nemuel, the clan of the Nemuelites; of Jamin, the clan of the Jaminites; of Jachin, the clan of the Jachinites;**
- (13) **of Zerah, the clan of the Zerahites; of Saul, the clan of the Saulites.**
- (14) **Those are the clans of the Simeonites; [persons enrolled:] 22,200.**
- (15) **Descendants of Gad by their clans: Of Zephon, the clan of the Zephonites; of Haggi, the clan of the Haggites; of Shuni, the clan of the Shunites;**
- (16) **of Ozni, the clan of the Oznites; of Eri, the clan of the Erites;**
- (17) **of Arod, the clan of the Arodites; of Areli, the clan of the Arelites.**
- (18) **Those are the clans of Gad's descendants; persons enrolled: 40,500.**

**(5) Reuben, Israel's first-born:** It should be noted that the order of the tribes as enumerated in the results of this census generally follows the marching order and encampment positions of the twelve tribes, as reported in the original census conducted some thirty-eight years earlier. There are four camps – eastern, southern, western, and northern – each of which was comprised of three tribes (Num. 2:1 ff.).

The southern camp consists of Reuben and Simon, Leah's eldest sons (that is, Jacob's eldest children, see Gen. 29:32-33), and Gad, the eldest son of Zilpah, Leah's maidservant (Gen. 30:9-11). As noted in the commentary to Num. 2:10, these three tribes took issue with Judah's leadership position, which they felt was rightfully theirs, and had been taken from them.

Although Reuben, Simon, and Gad are no longer leading tribes, they nonetheless still retain here some measure of primacy, and the enumeration of these census results therefore begins with them.

**(7) Those are the clans of the Reubenites. The persons enrolled came to 43,730:** The tribe of Reuben now numbers some three thousand less than at the first census. Their numbers have decreased (even if not very significantly).

**(9-10) And Dathan and Abiram. ... Whereupon the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with Korah ... when the fire consumed the two hundred and fifty men:** The mention of these details here would be off-topic, unless it is coming to inform us that the participants in Korah's rebellion forfeited their inheritance in the land. Unlike other conflicts in the wilderness, the people of Israel "withdrew from about the abodes of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram" (Num. 16:27). That is, the people renounced these villains, who then "vanished from the midst of the congregation" (Num. 16:33). Dathan and Abiram therefore lost their allotment in the land, because possessing territory in the Land of Israel is not an individual or private affair, but happens at the national level.

**(11) The sons of Korah, however, did not die:** And in the same vein, the Torah's remark here concerning the sons of Korah is meant to inform us that the sons of Korah retained their rights of inheritance in the land.

**(9-11) The same Dathan and Abiram ... who agitated ... Whereupon the earth ... swallowed them up ... The sons of Korah,**

**however, did not die:** Unlike Dathan and Abiram, whose only goal was to sow dissension for its own sake, Korah was at some level motivated by actual ideals. And that is why Dathan and Abiram perished along with their offspring, but the children of Korah did not die. In other words, the ideal of universal religious equality that Korah was promoting (“For all the community are holy, all of them”; see Num. 16:3) was in some sense predicated on enduring values. The Midrash even reports that the prophet Samuel was a descendant of Korah.

**(10) And they became an example.:** They became a warning sign for future generations, by discouraging outsiders from encroaching on the priesthood.

**(14) Those are the clans of the Simeonites; [persons enrolled:] 22,200:** The Simeon family suffered great losses. At the first census there were 59,000 men “able to bear arms” (Num. 1:22-23), but now there are only 22,000, a decrease of 37,000, with less than half the original number remaining.

Since a key instigator in the Midianite seduction was Zimri, a chieftain from the tribe of Simeon, we can surmise that significant numbers of his tribe were likewise involved in that scandal, and died in the resulting plague. (That is, most of the 24,000 persons who died in that plague were members of the tribe of Simon.)

The tribe of Simeon suffered its remaining losses during the four decades of wilderness wanderings, perhaps as the result of their active participation in the Korah revolt. We know that Simon was prone to impulsive and mindless actions. In the incident of Dinah and Shechem (Gen. 34) Simon and his brother Levi behaved impulsively.

Levi’s character subsequently underwent significant change, with responsible leaders descending from him – most notably, Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

But the tribe of Simon, on the contrary, continued to deteriorate, reaching their very worst moment when the Simeonite chieftain Zimri brought a Midianite woman into the Israelite camp and fornicated with her publicly. Levi’s impulsiveness found expression in the very same incident, but in precisely the opposite direction, when Phinehas killed Zimri in a fit of jealousy for God. Thus, the impulsiveness of the Levites has been greatly purified, while the impulsiveness of the Simeonites is now more impure than it ever was.

**(18) Those are the clans of Gad's descendants; persons enrolled:** 40,500: As the tribe of Gad numbered 45,000 at the first census, it has now decreased.

Thus, the total population of all three tribes of the southern camp has been greatly reduced – by 45,000 men of military age. This shows that this camp's tribes, who took offense at having been removed from leadership, could not achieve a constructive level. Apparently, the known participation of the members of these tribes in rebellions and debauchery constitutes only the most conspicuous examples of their unseemly behavior.

In the end, Simon's numbers had diminished to such a degree that in the Land of Israel they did not even receive their own territory, but settled among the tribe of Judah and eventually assimilated into it, completely losing their own communal identity.

Reuben and Gad too, because they had settled in the Transjordan at a distance from the rest of the tribes, were the first to be taken into captivity and disappear.

#### § 24.3. THE EASTERN CAMP – JUDAH, ISSACHAR, AND ZEBULUN (26:19-27)

יט בני יהודה ער ואונן וימת ער ואונן בארץ כנען: כ ויהיו בני יהודה  
למשפחתם לשלה משפחת השלני לפרץ משפחת הפרצי לזרח  
משפחת הזרחי: כא ויהיו בני פרץ לחצרן משפחת החצרני לחמול  
משפחת החמולי: כב אלה משפחת יהודה לפקדיהם ששה ושבעים  
אלף וחמש מאות:

כג בני יששכר למשפחתם תולע משפחת התולעי לפזה משפחת  
הפזגי: כד לישוב משפחת הישבי לשמרן משפחת השמרני: כה אלה  
משפחת יששכר לפקדיהם ארבעה וששים אלף ושלוש מאות:  
כו בני זבולן למשפחתם לסרד משפחת הסרדי לאלון משפחת האלני  
ליחלאל משפחת היחלאלי: כז אלה משפחת הזבולני לפקדיהם  
ששים אלף וחמש מאות:

(19) **Born to Judah: Er and Onan. Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan.**

(20) **Descendants of Judah by their clans: Of Shelah, the clan of the Shelanites; of Perez, the clan of the Perezites; of Zerah, the clan of the Zerahites.**

(21) **Descendants of Perez: of Hezron, the clan of the Hezronites; of Hamul, the clan of the Hamulites.**

(22) **Those are the clans of Judah; persons enrolled: 76,500.**

(23) **Descendants of Issachar by their clans: [Of] Tola, the clan of the Tolaites; of Puvah, the clan of the Punites;**

(24) **of Jashub, the clan of the Jashubites; of Shimron, the clan of the Shimronites.**

(25) **Those are the clans of Issachar; persons enrolled: 64,300.**

(26) **Descendants of Zebulun by their clans: Of Sered, the clan of the Seredites; of Elon, the clan of the Elonites; of Jahleel, the clan of the Jahleelites.**

(27) **Those are the clans of the Zebulunites; persons enrolled: 60,500.**

**(19) Born to Judah:** The eastern camp consists of Israel's leading tribes, all children of Leah: Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun.

**Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan:** The mention here of Er and Onan's death (see Gen. 38:6-10) further emphasizes that the families counted in this census correspond to the seventy members of Jacob's family who came down to Egypt.

**(22) Those are the clans of Judah; persons enrolled: 76,500:** At the onset of the journey the tribe of Judah had 74,000 men; that is, Judah's numbers have increased.

**(25) Those are the clans of Issachar; persons enrolled: 64,300:** Issachar's numbers have increased by 10,000.

**(27) Those are the clans of the Zebulunites; persons enrolled: 60,500:** This is an increase of 3,000.

In summation, all three tribes of the eastern camp have grown in number, with an overall increase of 15,000 men. Thus, this camp's role as the leaders of the nation has received additional confirmation.

§ 24.4. THE WESTERN CAMP – MANASSEH, EPHRAIM,  
AND BENJAMIN (26:28-41)

כח בְּנֵי יוֹסֵף לְמִשְׁפַּחַתָּם מְנַשֶּׁה וְאֶפְרַיִם: כט בְּנֵי מְנַשֶּׁה לְמַכִּיר מִשְׁפַּחַת  
הַמַּכִּירִי וּמַכִּיר הוֹלִיד אֶת־גִּלְעָד לְגִלְעָד מִשְׁפַּחַת הַגִּלְעָדִי: לו אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי  
גִלְעָד אִיעֶזֶר מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאִיעֶזְרִי לְחֵלֶק מִשְׁפַּחַת הַחֶלְקִי: לא וְאִשְׁרֵיָאֵל  
מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאִשְׁרָאֵלִי וְשֵׁכֶם מִשְׁפַּחַת הַשֵּׁכָמִי: לב וּשְׁמִיֶדָע מִשְׁפַּחַת  
הַשְּׁמִידָעִי וְחֶפְרִי מִשְׁפַּחַת הַחֶפְרִי: לג וְצֹלְפָחַד בֶּן־חֶפְרִי לְאִהֵי לֹו  
בָּנִים כִּי אִם־בָּנוֹת וְשֵׁם בָּנוֹת צֹלְפָחַד מַחֵלָה וְנֹעָה חַגִּלָּה מַלְכָּה  
וְתַרְצָה: לד אֵלֶּה מִשְׁפַּחַת מְנַשֶּׁה וּפְקֻדֵיהֶם שְׁנַיִם וַחֲמִשִּׁים אֶלֶף וּשְׁבַע  
מֵאוֹת:

לה אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי־אֶפְרַיִם לְמִשְׁפַּחַתָּם לְשׁוֹתָלַח מִשְׁפַּחַת הַשְּׁתָלַחִי לְבִכָר  
מִשְׁפַּחַת הַבִּכְרִי לְתַחַן מִשְׁפַּחַת הַתַּחְנִי: לו וְאֵלֶּה בְּנֵי שׁוֹתָלַח לְעֶזֶן  
מִשְׁפַּחַת הָעֶרְנִי: לו אֵלֶּה מִשְׁפַּחַת בְּנֵי־אֶפְרַיִם לְפְקֻדֵיהֶם שְׁנַיִם  
וּשְׁלֹשִׁים אֶלֶף וַחֲמִשׁ מֵאוֹת אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי־יוֹסֵף לְמִשְׁפַּחַתָּם:

לח בְּנֵי בְנִימֵן לְמִשְׁפַּחַתָּם לְבִלְע מִשְׁפַּחַת הַבְּלַעִי לְאִשְׁבָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת  
הָאִשְׁבָּלִי לְאֶחֱיָהִם מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאֶחֱיָרָמִי: לט לְשׁוּפָאִים מִשְׁפַּחַת הַשׁוּפָאִי  
לְחֻוָּפָאִים מִשְׁפַּחַת הַחֻוּפָאִי: מו וְהֵי בְּנֵי־בִלְע אַרְדֹּ וְנַעֲמֹן מִשְׁפַּחַת  
הָאֶרְדִּי לְנַעֲמֹן מִשְׁפַּחַת הַנַּעֲמִי: מא אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי־בְנִימֵן לְמִשְׁפַּחַתָּם  
וּפְקֻדֵיהֶם חֲמִשָּׁה וָאַרְבָּעִים אֶלֶף וְשֵׁשׁ מֵאוֹת:

(28) The sons of Joseph were Manasseh and Ephraim – by their clans.

(29) Descendants of Manasseh: Of Machir, the clan of the Machirites. – Machir begot Gilead. – Of Gilead, the clan of the Gileadites.

(30) These were the descendants of Gilead: [Of] Iezer, the clan of the Iezerites; of Helek, the clan of the Helekites;

(31) [of] Asriel, the clan of the Asrielites; [of] Shechem, the clan of the Shechemites;

(32) [of] Shemida, the clan of the Shemidaites; [of] Hopher, the clan of the Hopherites.

(33) – **Now Zelophehad son of Hepher had no sons, only daughters. The names of Zelophehad’s daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. –**

(34) **Those are the clans of Manasseh; persons enrolled: 52,700.**

(35) **These are the descendants of Ephraim by their clans: Of Shuthelah, the clan of the Shuthelahites; of Becher, the clan of the Becherites; of Tahan, the clan of the Tahanites.**

(36) **These are the descendants of Shuthelah: Of Eran, the clan of the Eranites.**

(37) **Those are the clans of Ephraim’s descendants; persons enrolled: 32,500. Those are the descendants of Joseph by their clans.**

(38) **The descendants of Benjamin by their clans: Of Bela, the clan of the Belaites; of Ashbel, the clan of the Ashbelites; of Ahiram, the clan of the Ahiramites;**

(39) **of Shephupham, the clan of the Shuphamites; of Hupham, the clan of the Huphamites.**

(40) **The sons of Bela were Ard and Naaman: [Of Ard,] the clan of the Ardites; of Naaman, the clan of the Naamanites.**

(41) **Those are the descendants of Benjamin by their clans; persons enrolled: 45,600.**

**(28) The sons of Joseph:** In the western camp, the relationship between Ephraim and Manasseh has now changed. In the original enumeration (Num. 1:32-35), Ephraim was mentioned first, but now Manasseh leads.

**(34) Those are the clans of Manasseh; persons enrolled: 52,700:** The tribe of Manasseh has seen the largest growth – an increase of 20,000 men. This is evidence of the tribe’s proper development and the Almighty’s blessings.

**(37) Those are the clans of Ephraim’s descendants; persons enrolled: 32,500:** This is a decrease of 8,000. At the Exodus from Egypt, the tribe of Ephraim was in the lead. Joshua too, Moses’ successor, was a descendant of this tribe. (There is even a midrash that states that a

part of this tribe was so eager to leave Egypt that they left ahead of the true Exodus, and perished as the result of their impatience.)

But the tribe of Ephraim later lost a significant portion of its population (in the wilderness, due to improper behavior), while Manasseh increased. And as Israel approached the Promised Land, this tribe demonstrated their great love for it, as expressed in the episode of the daughters of Zelophehad (see below Num. 27:1-11). In the end, Manasseh became the only tribe that straddled the Jordan on both sides, thus connecting the two territories of the Land of Israel.

**(38) The descendants of Benjamin ... 45,600:** Benjamin's tribe has increased by 10,000.

In the western camp, then, which is the second most significant center of Jewish life (surpassed only by Judah), there is a mixed dynamic – Manasseh and Benjamin have risen, while Ephraim has fallen. The net result, however, is that the number of men of military age in this camp has increased by 22,000. That is, the importance of the western camp has been retained, and even enhanced.

#### § 24.5. THE NORTHERN CAMP – DAN, ASHER, AND NAFTALI, AND THE GRAND TOTAL OF THE CENSUS

(26:42-50)

מב אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי־דָן לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְשׁוֹחֲמֵי מִשְׁפַּחַת הַשּׁוֹחֲמֵי אֵלֶּה מִשְׁפַּחַת  
דָּן לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם: מִגְּבֹל־מִשְׁפַּחַת הַשּׁוֹחֲמֵי לְפִקְדֵיהֶם אַרְבַּעַּה וְשָׁשִׁים  
אֵלֶּף וְאַרְבַּעַּת מֵאוֹת:

מִדְּבְנֵי אֲשֶׁר לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְיִמְנָה מִשְׁפַּחַת הַיְּמִנָּה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל מִשְׁפַּחַת הַיִּשְׂרָאֵל  
לְבְרִיָּעָה מִשְׁפַּחַת הַבְּרִיעִי: מִהַ לְבְנֵי בְרִיעָה לְחֹבֶר מִשְׁפַּחַת הַחֲבֻרִי  
לְמַלְכֵי־אֵל מִשְׁפַּחַת הַמַּלְכֵי־אֵלִי: מִזֹּ וְשָׁשׁ בֶּת־אֲשֶׁר שָׁרַח: מִזֹּ אֵלֶּה  
מִשְׁפַּחַת בְּנֵי־אֲשֶׁר לְפִקְדֵיהֶם שְׁלֹשָׁה וְחֲמִשִּׁים אֵלֶּף וְאַרְבַּעַּת מֵאוֹת:

מִחַ בְּנֵי נַפְתָּלִי לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְיִחְצְאֵל מִשְׁפַּחַת הַיִּחְצְאֵלִי לְגֹנִי מִשְׁפַּחַת  
הַגֹּנִי: מִטֹּ לְיִצָּר מִשְׁפַּחַת הַיִּצָּרִי לְשִׁלֹּם מִשְׁפַּחַת הַשְּׁלֹמִי: נֵ אֵלֶּה  
מִשְׁפַּחַת נַפְתָּלִי לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם וּפִקְדֵיהֶם חֲמִשָּׁה וְאַרְבַּעִים אֵלֶּף וְאַרְבַּעַּת  
מֵאוֹת: נֵ אֵלֶּה פְּקוּדֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁש־מֵאוֹת אֵלֶּף וְאַלְף שְׁבַע מֵאוֹת  
וְשָׁלְשִׁים:

(42) **These are the descendants of Dan by their clans: Of Shuham, the clan of the Shuhamites. Those are the clans of Dan, by their clans.**

(43) **All the clans of the Shuhamites; persons enrolled: 64,400.**

(44) **Descendants of Asher by their clans: Of Imnah, the clan of the Imnites; of Ishvi, the clan of the Ishvites; of Beriah, the clan of the Beriites.**

(45) **Of the descendants of Beriah: Of Heber, the clan of the Heberites; of Malchiel, the clan of the Malchielites.**

(46) **– The name of Asher’s daughter was Serah. –**

(47) **These are the clans of Asher’s descendants; persons enrolled: 53,400.**

(48) **Descendants of Naphtali by their clans: Of Jahzeel, the clan of the Jahzeelites; of Guni, the clan of the Gunites;**

(49) **of Jezer, the clan of the Jezerites; of Shillem, the clan of the Shillemites.**

(50) **Those are the clans of the Naphtalites, clan by clan; persons enrolled: 45,400.**

(51) **This is the enrollment of the Israelites: 601,730.**

(42) **These are the descendants of Dan:** The northern camp consisted of the descendants of the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah (Rachel and Leah’s maidservants).

(42-43) **The descendants of Dan ... 64,400:** The tribe of Dan has seen an increase of 2,000.

(47) **The clans of Asher’s descendants ... 53,400:** Asher’s tribe has grown by 12,000.

(48-50) **Descendants of Naphtali by their clans ... persons enrolled: 45,400:** Naftali’s military forces have decreased by 8,000.

Thus, in the northern camp, we once again see variable population dynamics. There is an overall increase of 6,000, but this growth is small, and these tribes’ influence on the life of the nation remains insignificant.

(51) **This is the enrollment of the Israelites: 601,730:** The number of Israelites as a whole has remained almost the same. Compared to

the results of the census that followed the Exodus, the number of men of military age, which excludes the Levites, has decreased by a mere 1,820. But the total count still exceeds the critical number of 600,000, considered the minimum for preserving the effective integrity of the Jewish people. (See the *Bible Dynamics* commentary on Num. 1:45.)

In the course of their wilderness wanderings, some tribes grew stronger while others weakened, depending on their behavior during that period. Some families no longer have any descendants at all, and the number of families has thus decreased by five. But according to the Midrash, the five daughters of Zelophehad compensate for that loss, because, due to their strong sense of independence and responsibility, each of them is considered, as it were, the founder of a new family in the nation of Israel. The structure of the Jewish nation as a whole has been preserved, although certain parts of it, and the relationships between them, have changed.

The Midrash compares Moses in this census to a hired shepherd who, when he first takes charge of the flock, records the number of animals, and proceeds to care for them. Then, at the completion of his task, he counts them yet again, and reports the overall results to his master, and to the shepherd who will be replacing him.

#### § 24.6. APPORTIONING THE LAND, THE LEVITE CENSUS, AND A NEW GENERATION OF ISRAELITES (26:52-65)

נב וידבר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: נג לְאַלֶּה תַחֲלֹק הָאָרֶץ בְּנַחֲלָה בְּמִסְפַּר שְׁמוֹת: נד לְרֹב תְּרַבָּה נַחֲלָתוֹ וְלִמְעוֹט תִּמְעָיִט נַחֲלָתוֹ אִישׁ לְפִי פְקֻדָּיו יִתֵּן נַחֲלָתוֹ: נה אֲדֹבְגוּרָל יַחֲלֹק אֶת־הָאָרֶץ לְשְׁמוֹת מִטּוֹת־אֲבֹתָם יִנְחִלוּ: נו עַל־פִּי הַגּוּרָל תַּחֲלֹק נַחֲלָתוֹ בֵּין רֹב לְמַעוֹט:

נד וְאַלֶּה פְּקוּדֵי הַלְוִי לְמִשְׁפַּחַתֶּם לְגִרְשׁוֹן מִשְׁפַּחַת הַגִּרְשֹׁנִי לְקֹהֵת מִשְׁפַּחַת הַקֹּהֲתִי לְמִרְרֵי מִשְׁפַּחַת הַמִּרְרִי: נה אֶלֶּה | מִשְׁפַּחַת לְוִי מִשְׁפַּחַת הַלְבִּי מִשְׁפַּחַת הַחֲבֻרֹנִי מִשְׁפַּחַת הַמַּחֲלִי מִשְׁפַּחַת הַמוּשִׁי מִשְׁפַּחַת הַקְּרָחִי וּקֹהֵת הַזֶּלֶזְלֵי אֶת־עַמְרָם: נט וְשֵׁם | אֵשֶׁת עַמְרָם יוֹכָבֵד בַּת־לְוִי אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה אֹתָהּ לְלוֹי בְּמִצְרַיִם וַתֵּלֶד לְעַמְרָם אֶת־אֶהֱרֹן וְאֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְאֵת מִרְיָם אָחֻתָם: ס וַיִּזְלַד לְאֶהֱרֹן אֶת־נָדָב וְאֶת־אֲבִיהֵוא

אֶת־אֲלֶעָזֶר וְאֶת־אִיתָמָר: סא וַיִּמָּת נָדָב וְאַבִּיהוּא בְּהַקְרִיבָם אֶשֶׁר־זָרָה  
 לִפְנֵי יי: סב וַיְהִיו פְּקֻדֵיהֶם שְׁלֹשָׁה וְעֶשְׂרִים אֱלֹף כֹּל־זָכָר מִבְּנֵי־חֹדֶשׁ  
 וּמֵעַלָּה כִּי | לֹא הִתְּפַקְדוּ בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי לֹא־נָתַן לָהֶם נַחֲלָה  
 בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: סג אֵלֶּה פְּקוּדֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאֲלֶעָזֶר הַכֹּהֵן אֲשֶׁר פָּקְדוּ  
 אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב עַל יַרְדֵּן יְרֵחוֹ: סד וּבְאֵלֶּה לֹא־הָיָה  
 אִישׁ מִפְּקוּדֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן אֲשֶׁר פָּקְדוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּמִּדְבָּר  
 סִינַי: סה כִּי־אָמַר יי לָהֶם מוֹת יָמָתוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר וְלֹא־נֹתַר מֵהֶם אִישׁ כִּי  
 אִם־כָּלָב בֶּן־יִפְתָּה וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נּוּן:

(52) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying,

(53) “Among these shall the land be apportioned as shares, according to the listed names:

(54) with larger groups increase the share, with smaller groups reduce the share. Each is to be assigned its share according to its enrollment.

(55) The land, moreover, is to be apportioned by lot; and the allotment shall be made according to the listings of their ancestral tribes.

(56) Each portion shall be assigned by lot, whether for larger or smaller groups.”

(57) This is the enrollment of the Levites by their clans: Of Gershon, the clan of the Gershonites; of Kohath, the clan of the Kohathites; of Merari, the clan of the Merarites.

(58) These are the clans of Levi: The clan of the Libnites, the clan of the Hebronites, the clan of the Mahlites, the clan of the Mushites, the clan of the Korahites. – Kohath begot Amram.

(59) The name of Amram’s wife was Jochebed daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt; she bore to Amram Aaron and Moses and their sister Miriam.

(60) To Aaron were born Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar.

(61) Nadab and Abihu died when they offered alien fire before the Lord. –

**(62) Their enrollment of 23,000 comprised all males from a month up. They were not part of the regular enrollment of the Israelites, since no share was assigned to them among the Israelites.**

**(63) These are the persons enrolled by Moses and Eleazar the priest who registered the Israelites on the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho.**

**(64) Among these there was not one of those enrolled by Moses and Aaron the priest when they recorded the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai.**

**(65) For the Lord had said of them, "They shall die in the wilderness." Not one of them survived, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.**

**(53-55) Among these shall the land be apportioned as shares, according to the listed names ... with larger groups increase the share, with smaller groups reduce the share ... The land, moreover, is to be apportioned by lot:** The land is divided among the families who left Egypt in the Exodus. But each family receives an allotment of land in proportion to its numbers at the end of the forty years, which, as already explained, depends on the behavior of its members over that interval. Those distributions are concretely determined, however, by lot.

**(57) This is the enrollment of the Levites by their clans:** The Levites are counted separately, since they do not receive their own allotment of land, but are settled in the forty-eight Levite cities provided for them by the other tribes (see Num. 35:7) – four per tribe, on average. However, the Levites' numbers too must be reckoned for the apportionment of the land, so that the Levites will be proportionally distributed among the other tribes.

**(57, 62) This is the enrollment of the Levites ... 23,000:** This is 1,000 more than the original count (Num. 3:39). The increase is relatively small, because during the wilderness wanderings the Levites conducted themselves at times admirably (in the incident of the golden calf) and at times less so (in the episode of the Korah rebellion).

**(64-65) Among these there was not one of those enrolled by Moses and Aaron the priest when they recorded the Israelites in**

**the wilderness of Sinai. For the Lord had said of them, “They shall die in the wilderness”:** In the space of forty years the old generation has been completely replaced with a new, younger one.

§ 24.7. THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD (27:1-11)

א ותקרבנה בנות צלפחד בן-חפר בן-גלעד בן-מכיר בן-מנשה  
למשפחת מנשה בן-יוסף ואלה שמות בנותיו מחלה נעה וחגלה  
ומלכה ותרצה: בתעמדתה לפני משה ולפני אלעזר הכהן ולפני  
הנשיאם וכלהעדה פתח אהל-מועד לאמר: ג אבינו מת במדבר  
והוא לא-היה בתוך העדה הנועדים עליי בעדת-קרח כי-בטחאו  
מת ובנים לא-היו לו: ד למה יגרע שם-אבינו מתוך משפחתו כי  
אין לו בן תנהלנו אחזה בתוך אחי אבינו: ה ויקרב משה את-  
משפטו לפני יי:

ו ויאמר יי אל-משה לאמר: ז בן בנות צלפחד דברת נתן תתן להם  
אחוזת נחלה בתוך אחי אביהם והעברת את-נחלת אביהו להן: ח ואל-  
בני ישראל תדבר לאמר איש כיימות וכל אין לו והעברתם את-  
נחלתו לבתו: ט ואם-אין לו בת ונתתם את-נחלתו לאחיו: י ואם-אין  
לו אחים ונתתם את-נחלתו לאחי אביו: יא ואם-אין אחים לאביו  
ונתתם את-נחלתו לשאריו הקרב אליו ממשפחתו וירש אתה והיתה  
לבני ישראל לחקת משפט כאשר צוה יי את-משה:

(1) The daughters of Zelophehad, of Manassite family – son of Hopher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph – came forward. The names of the daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.

(2) They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they said,

(3) “Our father died in the wilderness. He was not one of the faction, Korah’s faction, which banded together against the Lord, but died for his own sin; and he has left no sons.

(4) **Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!"**

(5) **Moses brought their case before the Lord.**

(6) **And the Lord said to Moses,**

(7) **"The plea of Zelophehad's daughters is just: you should give them a hereditary holding among their father's kinsmen; transfer their father's share to them.**

(8) **"Further, speak to the Israelite people as follows: 'If a man dies without leaving a son, you shall transfer his property to his daughter.**

(9) **If he has no daughter, you shall assign his property to his brothers.**

(10) **If he has no brothers, you shall assign his property to his father's brothers.**

(11) **If his father had no brothers, you shall assign his property to his nearest relative in his own clan, and he shall inherit it! This shall be the law of procedure for the Israelites, in accordance with the Lord's command to Moses."**

**(1-4) The daughters of Zelophehad ...came forward ... Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son!:** In essence, the daughters of Zelophehad are saying: "Because the Divine Law (concerning the allotment of the Land) that we have just now received contravenes moral principles and appears to us unjust, we cannot consent to it. We therefore demand that in light of the arguments we are now advancing, that law must be revisited and possibly revised."

Abraham and Moses likewise took issue on occasion with what God had instructed them. (See the episodes of the destruction of Sodom, Gen. 18; the golden calf, Exod. 32; and the spies, Num. 18.) We are thus given to understand that such dissent is an essential feature of Judaism, and not merely accidental, or a one-off occurrence.

Overall, the Almighty reacts positively to such objections (as seen in this case in His support of the objections of the daughters of Zelophehad). But He also corrects the proposals put forward to Him, setting a framework for them, or making other such adjustments as

may be required. That is, the Divine law is clarified and amended through the process of ongoing dialogue between God and man.

The law allowing daughters to inherit their father's estate was not initially communicated to Moses, but now comes into existence only through a challenge mounted by the daughters of Zelophehad to a certain point of the law concerning the apportionment of the land as originally promulgated.

Thus, the Torah teaches us that constructive human objections to the Divine law based on moral intuition are a normal and accepted pathway in Judaism's development. When Tradition has established a given law, we ought not think that we must *ipso facto* deem that law moral and final. On the contrary, if we find that a given law (as in this case of the daughters of Zelophehad) is inconsistent with our moral judgment and principles, then that law must be evaluated anew, and must, quite possibly, be revised.

In Moses' era such a correction would happen through a request made directly to the Almighty. But in subsequent eras – and even down to our own times – it is our duty to identify such problems on our own, to reconsider the law in the light of those issues, and, quite possibly, to amend the law accordingly.

**(1) The daughters of Zelophehad:** Although the response to the daughters' request concerns the general rules of inheritance, and is therefore relevant to both men and women, God will hand down that decision in response to a request made specifically by women. In stationary life, when the Jewish people are living in their own land, women have a stronger voice than they did during the nomadic wilderness years. Therefore, it is they who initiate legal action, and successfully motivate for the correction of the Law.

**Of Manassite family ... Manasseh son of Joseph:** The Torah stresses that they are descendants of Manasseh, and also that they are descendants of Joseph. This emphasizes that Joseph and Manasseh have an especially strong connection to the Land of Israel. Joseph's last dying words to his brothers were: "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here" (Gen. 50:25). (The Israelites carried Joseph's bones with them for the entire forty years in the wilderness, and eventually laid them to rest in the Land of Israel, in the city of Shechem. See Josh. 24:32.)

Joseph yearned to take possession of the Land, but at first he mistakenly strived to realize his aspirations in Egypt. Joseph achieves that correction, through which he becomes *Mashiach ben Yosef*, “the Messiah descended from Joseph,” by concentrating all his efforts on conquering and possessing the Land of Israel, not the land of Egypt.<sup>72</sup> The tribe of Manasseh realizes this attribute of their ancestor Joseph by receiving allotments of territory on both sides of the Jordan.

**The names of the daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah:** The names of Zelophehad’s five daughters are repeated several times. (After Num. 26:33 this is the second enumeration, with yet another to come at Num. 36:11.) The point of this repetition is to emphasize that each of Zelophehad’s five daughters had her own unique aspect of independent activity.

All the names of Zelophehad’s daughters express some form of movement:

- Mahlah from *machol*, “dancing.”
- Noah from *no`a*, “moving.”
- Hoglah, “whirling.”
- Milcah, “walking.”
- Tirzah, “running.”

(Note: Although this transliteration of “Noah” in the most common English Torah translations is identical to the name of Noah of Noah’s ark fame, the two names are actually entirely distinct. *Noah* is the correct transliteration of the name of Zelophehad’s second oldest daughter. Whereas *Noah* who built the ark is in Hebrew not *Noah* but *Noach*, and his name reflects not moving but resting – quite the opposite of the meaning of *Noah* here.)

This semantic unity of the names of Zelophehad’s five daughters underscores the importance of these five outstanding women in Jewish history; namely, they grasp the meaning of dynamics, movement, and initiative. When faced with a law that to many might seem immutable, and immune to alteration, these five sisters demonstrate that even Divine law is subject to revision.

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<sup>72</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on Gen. 50:25.

**(3) Our father died in the wilderness. He was not one of the faction, Korah's faction ... but died for his own sin:** Zelophehad's daughters must highlight this point, because the participants in Korah's rebellion are excluded from membership in the nation of Israel, and therefore have no inheritance in the land. But other sins, even if punishable by death, do not deprive the heirs of their right of inheritance.

**But died for his own sin:** The Midrash offers two opinions as to the identity of Zelophehad. One opinion identifies him with the man who incurred the death penalty for gathering wood on the sabbath day (Num. 15:32). But others believe that he was among those who after the episode of the spies defiantly ignored Moses' warning, marched up the mountain to do battle with the Amalekites and the Canaanites, and were dealt a shattering blow (Num. 14:40-45).

It would seem that neither of these opinions ought to be understood literally, given that both of those events took place in the first year after the Exodus, which would mean that none of the five sisters married over the entire thirty-eight years that followed. (The marriage of Zelophehad's five daughters is recorded below, in the closing chapter of this book of Numbers.) Rather, the intended meaning of the Midrash is that in both sins mentioned, although a Divine commandment was brazenly violated, the act nonetheless bore a certain positive seed that yearned for closeness to the Almighty and to receive an inheritance in the Land of Israel. The daughters of Zelophehad were able to redeem their father's sin by asserting that positive tendency.

**(8) If a man dies without leaving a son, you shall transfer his property to his daughter:** It is the sons who normally inherit chattel and real property, in exchange for which they are obliged to support their unmarried sisters and provide them with dowries. Giving the males this priority of inheritance is understandable in a situation where the main source of income is land, since women are usually not endowed with enough physical strength and stamina to cultivate it. But if there are no sons, the land passes to the daughters, and from them to their husbands and children.

But since in such cases the land might be transferred through the daughter to another tribe, the tribe of the man she marries, it was further decreed that in order to preserve each tribe's holdings,

a daughter who inherits her father's land must marry only a man of her own tribe. (See § 36 below for additional details concerning this requirement.)

(4) Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!: The concept of land holdings transferred by inheritance from generation to generation is extremely important in the life of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel.

In general, the desire to preserve one's name and to perpetuate oneself in at least some measure can be seen as a fundamental human aspiration. In the traditions of the people of Israel in ancient times, one means of preserving of the memory of ancestors was the hereditary ownership of the land, which passed from father to sons and thus preserved the name of the family. A concrete and striking example of this principle can be seen in the words of Naboth: "But Naboth replied, 'The Lord forbid that I should give up to you what I have inherited from my fathers!'" (1 Kings 21:3).

Selling such an inheritance is seen as nothing less than a sacrilege, and the equivalent of betraying one's ancestors. This perception derives from the fact that a Jew's connection with the Land of Israel through hereditary land holdings is precisely what actualizes his connection to God through the Holy Land.

When a person is forced to sell those land holdings, or if he dies without leaving sons, that connection is broken. In order to avert such personal crises, two Torah laws have been established:

(i) The commandment of *Yovel*, "the Jubilee year" (Lev. 25:8 ff.), which requires that all real property sold in the Land of Israel must revert to its original owners every fifty years.

(ii) The commandment of *yibbum*, "levirate marriage" (Deut. 25:5 ff.), which requires – or strongly prefers – that when a man dies childless, his widow will be married to a surviving brother of the deceased (or, in other eras, some other close relative of the deceased; see Gen. 38). The book of Ruth further emphasizes the connection between levirate marriage and inheritance of real property (Ruth 4).

If, however, a man dies having produced daughters but no sons, the line of inheritance continues through them. It is therefore wrong to view the daughters of Zelophehad as “feminists,” for it is not their own rights that they have come to assert, but the right of their father to have his name perpetuated and thus rescued from oblivion. And moreover, quite paradoxically, it is precisely the *patriarchal* concept of binding a man to his inherited land holdings that the daughters of Zelophehad wish to defend.

But even so, we also see here at work the fundamental principle of equality of the sexes (sons and daughters) in the sense of hereditary succession – continuity through progeny. These girls’ father, Zelophehad, although a sinner, is deemed worthy of having his name perpetuated through them. And this law of succession is more fundamental and more profound than other social institutions, such as the laws of inheritance. Thus, basic gender equality lies at the heart of human existence, even if social institutions often tend to obscure it.

#### § 24.8. JOSHUA IS APPOINTED MOSES’ SUCCESSOR (27:12-23)

יב וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עֲלֶה אֶל־הַר הָעֵבְרִים הַזֶּה וּרְאֵה אֶת־הָאָרֶץ  
 אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: יג וּרְאִיתָהּ אַתָּה וְנֹאסַפְתָּ אֶל־עַמִּידָ גַם־אַתָּה  
 כְּאֲשֶׁר נֹאסַף אֶהְרֹן אַחִיד: יד כְּאֲשֶׁר מְרִיתָם פִּי בַמַּדְבָּר־צֹן בְּמַרִּיבַת  
 הָעֵדָה לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי בַמִּים לְעִינֵיהֶם הֵם מִי־מַרִּיבַת קֹדֶשׁ מַדְבָּר־צֹן:  
 טו וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְיָ לֵאמֹר: טז יִפְקֹד יי אֱלֹהֵי הַרוּחַת לְכָל־בִּשָׂר אִישׁ  
 עַל־הָעֵדָה: יז אֲשֶׁר־יֵצֵא לְפָנֵיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יבֹא לְפָנֵיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יוֹצִיאֵם  
 וְאֲשֶׁר יביאֵם וְלֹא תִהְיֶה עֵדוּת יי בְּצֹאן אֲשֶׁר אֵין־לָהֶם רֵעָה: יח וַיֹּאמֶר  
 יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה קַח־לְךָ אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נֹון אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־רוּחַ בּוֹ וְסַמְכַתָּ  
 אֶת־יָדְךָ עָלָיו: יט וְהֶעַמְדַתְּ אֹתוֹ לְפָנֵי אֲלֵעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וּלְפָנֵי כָל־הָעֵדָה  
 וְצִוִּיתָהּ אֹתוֹ לְעִינֵיהֶם: כ וַנִּתְּתָהּ מִהוֹדֶךָ עָלָיו לְמַעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ כָל־עַדְתְּ  
 בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: כא וּלְפָנֵי אֲלֵעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן יַעֲמֵד וְשָׂאֵל לוֹ בְּמִשְׁפַּט הָאוּרִים  
 לְפָנֵי יי עַל־פִּיו יֵצְאוּ וְעַל־פִּיו יָבֹאוּ הוּא וְכָל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֹתוֹ וְכָל־  
 הָעֵדָה: כב וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי אֹתוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיַּעֲמֵדְהוּ  
 לְפָנֵי אֲלֵעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וּלְפָנֵי כָל־הָעֵדָה: כג וַיִּסְמָךְ אֶת־יָדָיו עָלָיו וַיְצַוְהוּ  
 כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יי בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה:

(12) **The Lord said to Moses, “Ascend these heights of Abarim and view the land that I have given to the Israelite people.**

(13) **When you have seen it, you too shall be gathered to your kin, just as your brother Aaron was.**

(14) **For, in the wilderness of Zin, when the community was contentious, you disobeyed My command to uphold My sanctity in their sight by means of the water.” Those are the Waters of Meribath-kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin.**

(15) **Moses spoke to the Lord, saying,**

(16) **“Let the Lord, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community**

(17) **who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that the Lord’s community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd.”**

(18) **And the Lord answered Moses, “Single out Joshua son of Nun, an inspired man, and lay your hand upon him.**

(19) **Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community, and commission him in their sight.**

(20) **Invest him with some of your authority, so that the whole Israelite community may obey.**

(21) **But he shall present himself to Eleazar the priest, who shall on his behalf seek the decision of the Urim before the Lord. By such instruction they shall go out and by such instruction they shall come in, he and all the Israelites, the whole community.”**

(22) **Moses did as the Lord commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community.**

(23) **He laid his hands upon him and commissioned him – as the Lord had spoken through Moses.**

**(12) The Lord said to Moses, “Ascend these heights of Abarim”:** *Har ha-`avarim* means, literally, “the mountain of transitions,” which it is in both the literal (physical) and figurative senses. Alongside this

mountain lies a passageway across the Jordan, making it the entrance to the Land of Israel. But it is also the “mountain of transition” in the sense that a transfer of Israel’s leadership will occur here.

Ascend these heights of Abarim and view the land that I have given to the Israelite people: Abarbanel comments that from this moment on, and until his final day, Moses climbed this mountain not just once, but many times, to view the Land of Israel. The fact that Moses can see the entire Land of Israel, even if he cannot enter it, is very important, because it allows Moses to give the nation correct and proper laws pertaining to the Land. In fact, these laws constitute the bulk of the book of Deuteronomy, which is soon to begin. That fifth and last book of the Torah differs from the four previous ones in just this aspect – its frequent and repeated references to the Land of Israel.

**(13) When you have seen it, you too shall be gathered to your kin:** This does not mean that Moses’ death is imminent; it is only a warning that there will be a proper transfer of power.

The Midrash explains, that after God gave Moses the procedures for dividing the Land of Israel among the tribes, Moses wondered whether perhaps the Almighty had changed his mind and would allow him to enter the Land of Israel after all, in order to oversee its apportionment to the tribes. Therefore, the Almighty here tells Moses that the prior decree remains in force, and that Moses must depart from the scene.

**(14) For, in the wilderness of Zin, when the community was contentious, you disobeyed My command to uphold My sanctity in their sight by means of the water:** Whenever the Torah speaks of the death of Moses and Aaron, it indicates their sin explicitly, lest anyone think that they too were punished along with the Exodus generation for rejecting the Land of Israel (Num. 14:31).

**(15) Moses spoke to the Lord, saying:** This is the only place in the entire Torah where we find such an atypical, “reverse” formulation, instead of the usual “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying,” which introduces many of the commandments. The purpose of this reverse phrasing is to emphasize that Moses here for the first time addresses God with a demand: he demands that the Almighty show his concern for the people of Israel by appointing a leader to succeed Moses.

**(16) Let the Lord ... appoint someone:** As noted very early in our commentary on this book of Numbers (Num. 1:2), the verbal root

*P-K-D* has several related meanings, which include: “appointing,” “remembering,” and “counting” (a large group of people, specifically, i.e., conducting a census). The last of those meanings, “counting,” is the source of the traditional Jewish name of this book, *Chumash Ha-Pekudim*, “The Book of the Census.” And it also the root of the modern Hebrew word *mifkad*, which means “census” or “muster.” In the broader sense, then, the name *Chumash Ha-Pekudim* indicates that counting, appointing, and calling (in the sense of mission and destiny) are the primary topics of this book.

**(13-16) Just as your brother Aaron was [gathered to his kin] ... Let the Lord ... appoint someone:** The Midrash explains the connection between these verses as follows. Moses observed that Aaron’s son Eleazar had been chosen as Aaron’s successor. And that God had also endorsed the position of Zelophehad’s daughters, which underscored the importance of the principle that children are first in line to inherit from their parents. But up to this point God had made no mention whatsoever of who would succeed Moses as the leader of the Jewish people. And therefore, Moses now turns to God with a request that his sons would likewise inherit him.

**(16) The Lord, Source of the breath of all flesh:** That is, He Who knows the thoughts and understands the soul of every human being. (Cf. Num. 16:22: “But they fell on their faces and said, ‘O God, Source of the breath of all flesh! When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?’”) This quality is essential for correctly choosing a leader.

**(17) Who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in:** A leader of the people must himself set an example for them, which Moses could no longer do. Thus, Moses here accepts the Almighty’s criteria for choosing correct leadership, and resigns himself to God’s decision to replace him.

**So that the Lord’s community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd:** To Moses’ thinking, a people without a leader are like sheep without a shepherd – they will wander apart and soon perish. That is, Moses is convinced that the people cannot really accomplish anything useful on their own. But even if this viewpoint is accurate for

a wilderness lifestyle, it is by no means true of a people living an ideal life in their own land.

This precisely is one of the reasons that Moses must depart. The people must be given an opportunity to demonstrate their independence, for without that any real achievement at an advanced spiritual level is impossible.

**(18) And the Lord answered Moses, “Single out Joshua son of Nun”:** Moses’ sons will not inherit or succeed him in any sense. Unlike Temple leadership, the priesthood, which passes from father to son, political leadership is not inherited. The next leader might even be from a completely different tribe (as in this case, Joshua, of the tribe of Ephraim).

**Single out Joshua son of Nun:** For Moses, this is a harsh and unexpected decision. Appointments of this kind occur, of course, according to personal merit, but lineage must also be considered. When a person is appointed as leader, it is also a recognition of his clan’s leadership qualities, and those of his tribe.

While the leadership was in the hands of the Levites – Moses, Aaron, and Miriam – the people were effectively being led by the priests. But now, upon entering the Land, a situation of division of power arises: the priesthood remains with Levi, but the political leadership goes for now to Ephraim. Here the stark contrast between the Levites and the Ephraimites is revealed.

The Levites, who replaced the firstborn, are appointed from Above, and are therefore completely subordinate to God’s instructions; they have no plan of action of their own. They are zealous in defending God’s directions, but they are not independent.

The symbol of independence and “awakening from below” is Joseph, here represented by the tribe of Ephraim. As already noted, it was the tribe Ephraim who are said to have left Egypt ahead of the general Exodus; thus we see that the Ephraimites are strongly disposed to exercising independent initiative. It is from this tribe that political power must derive in the era of the conquest of the land, when it is essential that the people will be able to act independently.

**An inspired man:** *Ish asher ruach bo*, literally, “a man in whom there is spirit.” This is meant in two senses: a man who has a special

connection with God, and a man who demonstrates independence of spirit and moral self-sufficiency.

Joshua is the only person who combines both of these qualities. He received his special connection with God at the giving of the Torah, when Moses ascended the mountain for his forty-day stay at the summit, and Joshua waited for Moses not down below, like the rest of the people, but halfway up the mountain. Thus, Joshua was, as it were, a “half-participant” in the actual giving of the Torah, and had no involvement whatsoever in the incident of the golden calf. And later, moreover, “[Moses’] attendant, Joshua son of Nun, a youth, would not stir out of the Tent” (Exod. 33:11).

As for his inner strength and independence in choosing his own path – this attribute of Joshua first manifested in the episode of the spies.

**And lay your hand upon him:** Such a symbolic laying of hands says, “You can lean on this man and he will support you”; that is, you can rely on him. The same Hebrew root used here for laying hands, *S-M-CH*, also means to lean on something or be supported or rely on someone or something. Hence, a transfer of authority is called *semichah*, literally, “laying of hands, support, reliance.” (Rabbinic ordination, for example, is also called *semichah*.)

**(19) Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community, and commission him in their sight:** The Hebrew here for “commission him” is *ve-tzivita oto*, literally, “you shall command him.” Here it means that Moses was to explain to Joshua what the transfer of authority entails – the scope of the governmental power he was receiving, and, especially, its limitations.

A leader of the Jewish nation is not an autocrat. He is limited by the law of the Torah, and has only the power that the Divine law invests in him.

**Before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community:** That is, in the presence of the Almighty and of the people. Both the power itself and the restrictions placed on it derive from two sources: God’s instructions and the people’s trust. A leader in Israel is held doubly accountable for his actions: first to Heaven, and then to the people he governs.

**(20) Invest him with some of your authority, so that the whole Israelite community may obey:** Until that moment, Joshua was only Moses' assistant. It was therefore necessary to elevate him officially and publicly to the status of a leader.

The Midrash takes special note of the wording, "some of your authority" – some, but not all. Accordingly, the Midrash likens Moses' countenance to the sun, and that of Joshua to the moon. However, this metaphor refers not only to the relative amount of light that emanates from each, but to the opportunity that each grants to others to express and assert their independence. The sun is so bright that its light completely obscures the stars, which are therefore never visible during the day, whereas the moon allows the stars to shine and be seen. By analogy, Moses' leadership hinders the people from manifesting their own abilities, while Joshua's leadership affords them the opportunity to do just that.

**(21) But he shall present himself to Eleazar the priest:** Unlike Moses, Joshua could not freely address the Almighty at any time and expect an immediate response. Rather, he had to direct his questions to God through the High Priest.

**Who shall on his behalf seek the decision of the Urim before the Lord:** The full name of this mechanism was "the Urim and Thummim" (Exod. 28:30). The term refers to a feature of the High Priest's breastplate – twelve precious stones arranged in rows of three, on which were carved the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Through the Urim and Thummim the High Priest would receive the the Almighty's responses and decisions.

**By such instruction they shall go out and by such instruction they shall come in:** The most important use of the Urim and Thummim was to seek the Almighty's guidance in matters of war. Specifically, Israel would base its decision as to whether or not it should go to war in a given situation on the response received through the High Priest.

**(22-23) Moses did as the Lord commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community. He laid his hands upon him and commissioned him – as the Lord had spoken through Moses:** This is not yet a complete transfer of power from Moses to Joshua. Even after this ceremony we

will see that Moses continues to govern the people. Joshua will assume full leadership of the nation only after Moses' death.

From this moment on, however, a transitional period begins, during which the future leader undergoes an internship, as it were, as he learns to make correct decisions. And likewise, the people accept him as their new leader in advance, in order to avoid a crisis of power at the moment when the former leader actually departs.<sup>73</sup>

The Midrash also reports that Joshua did in fact render certain decisions even during Moses' lifetime, and that Moses approved and confirmed those decisions. Such actions demonstrated that Joshua was truly the right leader for the nation, and were thus an important element in the education of the people.

**(22) He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community:** Formerly it was Moses and Aaron who governed the nation, but Joshua and Eleazar would eventually assume their roles. Either of those pairs represents a condition of stability, while the period of Moses' and Eleazar's leadership is seen as an intermediate position. We would do well to note that not by mere chance did the episode of the daughters of Zelophehad happen during this transitional interval, under Moses and Eleazar.

Joshua's relationship to Eleazar is significantly different from Moses's relationship to Aaron. Moses, who was Aaron's superior, anointed Aaron to the priesthood. But now, on the contrary, Joshua is spiritually subordinate to Eleazar. God therefore commands Moses to "have him (Joshua) stand before Eleazar the priest." That is, Moses and Eleazar seem to commission Joshua together, but it is Eleazar who in a certain sense anoints Joshua as the new ruler of the kingdom, as it were.

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<sup>73</sup> In a monarchical system of government it is, generally speaking, not only beneficial but essential for an incoming king to take office during the lifetime of his predecessor, such that for some time they rule together. This approach gives stability to the process of transferring power. King David (under pressure from the prophet Nathan) followed exactly that plan, to assure that his son Solomon would inherit the entire kingdom intact. But Solomon did not effect such a transfer to his successor. His son Rehoboam, who took power immediately after Solomon's death, made every mistake imaginable, with the result that the kingdom soon split and eventually perished.

**(23) He laid his hands upon him:** God had commanded Moses above, “Single out Joshua son of Nun ... and lay your hand upon him” – “hand”, singular. But Moses laid both hands. That is, one hand at the Almighty’s direction, and the other hand at his own initiative. Thus does Moses express his assent to Joshua’s appointment as his successor.

During the wilderness era all power was concentrated in one family, and Joshua’s appointment therefore means not only a change in the person who will lead, but also a change in the system of power: it will now be divided into two separate and independent branches. Later, in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses will mandate that that power be further divided into not just two but four independent branches: the kingdom (royalty), the priesthood, the sages, and the prophets. Moses himself united all four of those branches. He was all of the above: king, prophet, highest of the high priests, and sage.

But the wilderness era is still only the prehistory of the Jewish nation, whose real, independent history will begin only after the people enter the Land of Israel. And that is where the separation of powers becomes truly essential.

## § 25. TEMPLE SACRIFICES

### § 25.1 THE DAILY SACRIFICES (28:1-8)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב צוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אֶת־  
קַרְבְּנֵי לַחֲמִי לְאִשֵּׁי רִיחַ נִיחֹחַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ לְהַקְרִיב לִי בְמוֹעֲדוֹ: ג וְאָמַרְתָּ  
לָהֶם זֶה הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר תִּקְרִיבוּ לִי כַבָּשִׂים בְּנֵי־שָׁנָה תְּמִימִם שְׁנַיִם  
לְיוֹם עֹלָה תָּמִיד: ד אֶת־הַכֶּבֶשׂ אֶחָד תַּעֲשֶׂה בַבֶּקֶר וְאֵת הַכֶּבֶשׂ הַשֵּׁנִי  
תַּעֲשֶׂה בֵּין הָעֶרְבִים: ה וְעִשְׂרִית הָאֵיפָה סֶלֶת לַמִּנְחָה בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן  
כֶּתִית רְבִיעֵת הֶהָיִן: ו עֹלֹת תָּמִיד תַּעֲשֶׂינָהּ בְּהַר סִינַי לְרִיחַ נִיחֹחַ  
אִשָּׁה לִּי: ז וְנִסְכּוֹ רְבִיעֵת הֶהָיִן לַכֶּבֶשׂ הָאֶחָד בַּקֹּדֶשׁ הַסֹּדֵד גִּסְדֹּד שֶׁכֶר  
לִי: ח וְאֵת הַכֶּבֶשׂ הַשֵּׁנִי תַּעֲשֶׂה בֵּין הָעֶרְבִים כַּמִּנְחָת הַבֶּקֶר וְכַנְסֹכּוֹ  
תַּעֲשֶׂה אִשָּׁה רִיחַ נִיחֹחַ לִי:

- (1) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:
- (2) Command the Israelite people and say to them: Be punctilious in presenting to Me at stated times the offerings of food due Me, as offerings by fire of pleasing odor to Me.
- (3) Say to them: These are the offerings by fire that you are to present to the Lord: As a regular burnt offering every day, two yearling lambs without blemish.
- (4) You shall offer one lamb in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight.
- (5) And as a meal offering, there sha

It be a tenth of an *ephah* of choice flour with a quarter of a *hin* of beaten oil mixed in

(6) – the regular burnt offering instituted at Mount Sinai – an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord.

(7) The libation with it shall be a quarter of a *hin* for each lamb, to be poured in the sacred precinct as an offering of fermented drink to the Lord.

(8) The other lamb you shall offer at twilight, preparing the same meal offering and libation as in the morning – an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord.

(1) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:** These are the laws pertaining to the sacrifices that will be brought in the Temple after entry into the Land of Israel.

Opinions differ as to which (if any) of the sacrifices were performed during the forty years of wanderings in the wilderness. The most widely accepted opinion, it seems, is that in those years the “perpetual” daily offering of two lambs was performed, but the adjuncts that accompany them (flour, oil, and wine), and the additional offerings of the Sabbath, New Moon, and festivals as well, were brought only after the Israelites entered the Land of Israel. And that is the reason that those offerings are described in detail at just this place in the Torah. During the forty years in the wilderness, except for the first-anniversary Passover celebration one year following the Exodus (see Num. 9:1 ff.), no festivals were observed at all.<sup>74</sup>

(2) **Command the Israelite people and say to them:** The sacrifices, and also the Tabernacle and its functioning in general, are presented differently in this book of Numbers, as compared with the earlier books of the Torah (Exodus and Leviticus).

According to the book of Exodus, the Tabernacle is primarily a place for continuation of the Divine revelation that occurred at Sinai, and that happens through Moses. The priests play only a “supporting” role – they merely facilitate the proper functioning of that revelation.

<sup>74</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on Num. 9:14 ff. concerning Pesach Sheini, “Second Passover.”

Accordingly, the consecration of the Tabernacle in Exodus is described as “the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle” (Exod. 40:34). Thus, the Tabernacle is portrayed there as, essentially, a “Mount Sinai in miniature.”

The Book of Leviticus, in contrast, describes the Tabernacle as a place of service to the Almighty, where the sacrifices are performed. The consecration of the Tabernacle (Lev. 8-9) occurs through the *kohen*'s preparation for service, and through the sacrifices of initiation.

These two approaches, of Exodus and of Leviticus, are complementary opposites. The first symbolizes spiritual movement coming from Above, and the second – from below upward.

But this book, Numbers, presents the Tabernacle yet differently – as the center of Israel's national and public life, a social (and not merely religious) center. In this book (Num. 7), the consecration of the Tabernacle is therefore achieved through gifts and sacrificial offerings brought by the chieftains of the tribes on behalf of the entire Jewish nation.

At the same time, the beginning of the book of Numbers describes only those aspects of the Tabernacle that were relevant in the wilderness, its role as the center of the nation's encampments, and the direction of movement in the military campaign. But here, at the end of the journey through the wilderness, the focal point of Israel's communication with the Almighty is the Tabernacle and the sacrifices performed within it.

The *korban tamid*, the perpetual daily sacrifice, and the *musafim*, the additional Sabbath, New Moon, and festival sacrifices, all of which are described in these next two chapters, are public, national sacrifices that have no explicit local, “pragmatic” objective. Their purpose is not to address issues that arise in everyday life – to effect atonement, for example, or as an expression of gratitude (other sacrifices perform those roles). Rather, these sacrifices are regular and unchanging, a foundation of the Temple service, expressing God's constant connection with His people. These sacrifices are the foundation of national identity. Such is the role of the Tabernacle and, later, of the permanent Temple, in the life of the Jewish people in their new land.

Thus, the description of the sacrifices that follows in the Torah here is essentially an appeal to the nation as a whole, but there is

no mention whatsoever of the priests. It is of course the priests who perform these sacrifices, but in the perspective of this chapter the priests are only the people's "technical representatives" as it were, and there is therefore no need to mention them explicitly.

**(2) Command the Israelite people and say to them: ... the offerings of food due Me, as offerings by fire of pleasing odor to Me:** The Hebrew word for "food" in this verse is *lechem*, which literally means "bread." Thus this verse refers to all the sacrifices as "God's bread." According to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, this may be telling us that in the future era animal sacrifices will be discontinued, and only grain offerings will remain. This would happen as part of a global transition to vegetarianism, reflecting mankind's eventual refusal to kill animals for food. There will no longer be any need to offer animal sacrifices on the Temple altar.

**Be punctilious in presenting to Me at stated times:** The sacrifices described in this chapter are offered at established times in the weekly, monthly, and yearly cycles, thus expressing the regularity that is the basis of life. Note that the essential idea of sacrifices in general is constancy – preservation of the status quo, as opposed to prayer, which is a request for change and improvement. The purpose of sacrifice is to preserve the world, to prevent it from deteriorating and falling apart. Prayer, conversely, is a plea for the world to change for the better.

**(3) Say to them: These are the offerings by fire that you are to present to the Lord:** As a regular burnt offering every day, two yearling lambs without blemish: This is the *korban tamid*, the "perpetual sacrifice" – so called because it was offered daily in the Temple with no exception whatsoever.

**Lambs:** A lamb is a young sheep of the family of small, horned, ruminant mammals.

**Without blemish:** A basic requirement for all animal sacrifices is that they must be blemish-free (see Lev. 22:17 ff.).

**As a regular burnt offering:** Hebrew, *olah*, – literally, "that which ascends." The traditional translation is "burnt offering." An *olah* is a sacrifice that is completely burnt on the altar. No part of it is eaten – not by the priests, and not by the person who offers it (which in this case, however, is the entire nation of Israel).

**Every day:** The Hebrew is *tamid*, – “perpetually, constantly,” which here means that this offering is brought daily, every day of the year without exception. This reinforces in the minds of the people that the Temple service, and its influence, are constant and continuous.

**(4) You shall offer one lamb in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight:** That is, the one lamb when the light of day first shines, and the other when the day is ending.

**(5) And as a meal offering, there shall be a tenth of an ephah of choice flour with a quarter of a hin of beaten oil mixed in:** Bread with olive oil and a libation of wine were offered together with each of these sacrifices. Thus, the sacrifices united all the major components of the human diet.

Fruits were also brought to the Temple as “first fruits” (see Num. 28:26 below, and Deut. 26:1 ff.). And vegetables were eaten by the priests, if they wished to do so, along with the sacrifices, but they were not a formal part of any Temple offering. That is, vegetables were considered a “supplementary” food rather than one of the fundamental food categories.

**A tenth of an ephah:** An *ephah* is the primary dry measure of volume of granular bulk products in the Torah. It is approximately equal to 38 liters (34 dry quarts), one tenth of which – about 3.8 liters (3.4 dry quarts) – is called below *issaron*, “a tenth part”. (Another common name for *issaron* is *omer*; see Exod. 16:36: “The omer is a tenth of an *ephah*.”)

**Flour:** *Solet*, “finely ground wheat flour.” Everything related to the Temple sacrifices must be of the highest quality.

**With a quarter of a hin of beaten oil mixed in:** A *hin* is a measure of liquid volume equal to approximately 6.5 liters (6.9 liquid quarts).

**Beaten oil:** “Beaten” oil means olive oil of the highest quality. The best olive oil came from the “first pressing” – the oil that flows only from squeezing, and does not require that the olives be crushed. It was this best-quality oil that was used to kindle the Temple menorah (Exod. 27:20), and for the sacrifices.

**(6) The regular burnt offering instituted at Mount Sinai – an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord:** Mount Sinai is relevant here in two ways:

(i) Because the first sacrifices offered by the Jewish nation were performed at the consecration of the Tabernacle at Mount Sinai, they serve as a reference point for all subsequent sacrifices, which are analogous to them.

(ii) The altar in the Sanctuary and the fire that burns continuously upon it (“A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, not to go out”; see Lev. 6:6) are a miniature representation of Mount Sinai that had “devouring fire” at its summit (Exod. 19:18, Deut. 5:22).

Thus, the perpetual daily sacrifice symbolizes the everlasting connection of the Jewish people to Mount Sinai, where their covenant with the Almighty was concluded.

**An offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord:** The Almighty is pleased that the people of Israel never forget the covenant He made with them, and that they make that covenant the basis of Jewish national life.

**(7) The libation with it shall be a quarter of a *hin* for each lamb:** Although the priests are forbidden to drink wine while they serve in the Temple (Lev. 10:9), wine is poured on the altar as an essential component of many sacrifices.

Everything in the material world can be utilized in the service of the Almighty – an approach that characterizes life in the Land of Israel, but was not operative during the wilderness years. This is why no libations of wine accompanied the sacrifices that were brought during those years of wilderness wanderings.

**As an offering of fermented drink to the Lord:** The Hebrew here is *shechar*, a “heady wine” that has been aged and has fermented. Grape juice does not qualify.

**(8) The other lamb you shall offer at twilight:** Twilight is the end of the daylight hours that generally coincide with typical working hours. Bringing a sacrifice at the start and end of every workday is symbolic of the principle that all worldly human activity should be directed to the service of the Almighty.

**Every day:** The Hebrew is *tamid*, – “perpetually, constantly,” which here means that this offering is brought daily, every day of the year without exception. This reinforces in the minds of the people that the Temple service, and its influence, are constant and continuous.

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Everything in the material world can be utilized in the service of the Almighty – an approach that characterizes life in the Land of Israel, but was not operative during the wilderness years. This is why no libations of wine accompanied the sacrifices that were brought during those years of wilderness wanderings.

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**(8) The other lamb you shall offer at twilight:** Twilight is the end of the daylight hours that generally coincide with typical working hours. Bringing a sacrifice at the start and end of every workday is symbolic of the principle that all worldly human activity should be directed to the service of the Almighty.

## § 25.2. SACRIFICES OF THE SABBATH AND THE NEW MOON

(28:9-15)

ט וביום השבת שני־כבשים בני־שנה תמימם ושני עֲשָׂרִים סֶלֶת מנחה בלולה בשמן ונסכו: עלת שבת בשבתו על־עלת התמיד ונסכה:

יא ובראשי חֲדָשֵׁיכֶם תִּקְרִיבוּ עֹלָה לִי פָרִים בְּנֵי־בָקָר שְׁנַיִם וְאַיִל אֶחָד כְּבָשִׂים בְּנֵי־שָׁנָה שְׁבַע תְּמִימִם: יב וּשְׁלֹשָׁה עֲשָׂרִים סֶלֶת מנחה בלולה בשמן לפר האחד ושני עֲשָׂרִים סֶלֶת מנחה בלולה בשמן לאיל האחד: יג וְעֶשְׂרֹן עֶשְׂרֹן סֶלֶת מנחה בלולה בשמן לכבש האחד עלה ריח ניחח אשה ליי: יד וְנִסְכֵיהֶם חֲצִי הַהֵיזֵק יִהְיֶה לְפָר וּשְׁלִישֵׁת הַהֵיזֵק לְאַיִל וּרְבִיעֵת הַהֵיזֵק לְכֶבֶשׂ יִזֶן זֹאת עֹלֹת חֲדָשׁ בְּחֲדָשׁוֹ לְחֲדָשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה: טו וּשְׁעִיר עֲזִים אֶחָד לְחַטָּאת לִי עַל־עֹלֹת הַתְּמִיד יַעֲשֶׂה וְנִסְכוֹ:

(9) On the sabbath day: two yearling lambs without blemish, together with two-tenths of a measure of choice flour with oil mixed in as a meal offering, and with the proper libation –

(10) a burnt offering for every sabbath, in addition to the regular burnt offering and its libation.

(11) On your new moons you shall present a burnt offering to the Lord: two bulls of the herd, one ram, and seven yearling lambs, without blemish.

(12) As meal offering for each bull: three-tenths of a measure of choice flour with oil mixed in. As meal offering for each ram: two-tenths of a measure of choice flour with oil mixed in.

(13) As meal offering for each lamb: a tenth of a measure of fine flour with oil mixed in. Such shall be the burnt offering of pleasing odor, an offering by fire to the Lord.

(14) Their libations shall be: half a *hin* of wine for a bull, a third of a *hin* for a ram, and a quarter of a *hin* for a lamb. That shall be the monthly burnt offering for each new moon of the year.

**(15) And there shall be one goat as a sin offering to the Lord, to be offered in addition to the regular burnt offering and its libation.**

**(9-10) On the sabbath day: two yearling lambs ... in addition to the regular burnt offering and its libation:** The additional Sabbath and festival sacrifices are called *musafim*, “additions” (the singular is *musaf*). In the post-Temple era, when – since the year 70 CE – there is neither a Temple nor sacrifices, the term *musaf* has been retained as the name of the prayer still recited on those same days, in memory of the sacrifices that were brought long ago on such occasions. The practice of bringing such sacrifices was already mentioned earlier (Lev. 23:37-38). But only here, as the Jewish people are on the threshold of entering the Land of Israel, are they described in detail.

The *musaf* of the Sabbath day – two yearling lambs and two *ephahs* of fine flour – precisely duplicates the daily sacrifice. That is, on the *Sabbath* there is a doubling of the perpetual daily sacrifice. *Shabbat* expresses “double completeness,” an additional abundance of life that supplements normal, everyday existence with a second measure of everything, as compared with the weekdays. Each *Shabbat*, in the wilderness, a double portion of manna was consumed. And in later eras it was likewise customary to double the food eaten and the lights kindled. Tradition even maintains that on the *Sabbath* every Jew is blessed with an “additional Sabbath soul.”

**(9) Two-tenths of a measure of choice flour:** Here the word *issaron* is used (from *eser*, “ten”), that is, one tenth of an *ephah*. Above (Num. 28:5), this same measure was expressed as, simply, “a tenth of an *ephah*.” Either way, it means about 3.8 liters (3.4 dry quarts), since an *ephah* is about 38 liters (34 dry quarts).

**(11) On your new moons:** In the ancient era the new Jewish month always began when, some hours after the actual “new moon” in the literal sense, when the moon is not visible from the Earth at all, the thinnest visible crescent of the new moon then first appeared.

Technically, the beginning of the month was proclaimed by the decision of the Sanhedrin (the Supreme Court of Justice that was located at the Temple). Its judges would hear testimony on behalf of

the people that the new moon has been spotted, and would accept that evidence after they deemed it credible. (See Exod. 12:2 and the commentaries there.)

Unlike the Sabbath, which occurs at constant and immutable seven-day intervals, and is thus “declared from Above,” the beginning of each month depends on a human decision rendered by the Jewish people themselves. The *musaf* sacrifice of the new moon is therefore associated with the Patriarchs (understood as dynamic characters, open to the future as they were developing and changing during their lives; see the *Biblical Dynamics* commentary on the book of Genesis). It expresses the increased abundance of life that each new month brings, because it no longer depends on nature, but on the people, as creators of their own destiny.

This is why the Torah here says, “On *your* new moons,” which emphasizes the element of human agency that is involved in declaring the New Moon, whereas above (Num. 28:9) it refers to *Shabbat* as, simply, “the sabbath day” (without “your”).

**Two bulls of the herd, one ram, and seven yearling lambs:** The two bulls symbolize the connection with Abraham (Gen. 15:9, 18:7). The ram was sacrificed in place of Isaac (Gen. 22:13), and the lambs are associated with Jacob (Gen. 30:40).

**(12-13) As meal offering for each bull: three-tenths of a measure of choice flour ... As meal offering for each ram: two-tenths of a measure ... As meal offering for each lamb: a tenth of a measure:** The size of each meal offering corresponds to the size of the animal. A larger animal requires a larger meal offering.

**(14) Their libations shall be: half a *hin* of wine for a bull, a third of a *hin* for a ram, and a quarter of a *hin* for a lamb:** And likewise, the amount of wine for each libation also corresponds to the size of the animal.

**(15) And there shall be one goat as a sin offering to the Lord:** The *musaf* sacrifice of every festival, and of the New Moon as well, included a goat as a sin offering. Its purpose was to atone for the sins of the priests and the Levites, who might have inadvertently entered the Temple in a state of ritual impurity.

(Ordinary persons had dealings with the Temple and the sacrifices only at special moments of the year, for which they came well-prepared. This included mindfulness to always exercise due caution and reverence. But entering the Temple was for the priests and the Levites a regular, even routine, activity, and mistakes on their part were therefore much more likely to happen.)

Festivals are days of joy and celebration. But joy cannot be complete unless there is a preliminary cleansing from sin. Unlike the other *musaf* sacrifices, the goats brought as sin offerings were never supplemented with flour, or libations of wine and oil, because such sacrifices are associated with cleansing from sin, rather than the fullness of life.

**One goat as a sin offering to the Lord:** The New Moon and all the festivals of the year require a sin offering of a goat each day. But the New Moon is the only *musaf* sacrifice where the instruction to bring that sin offering includes the words “to the Lord.” Moreover, the Hebrew can also be translated as “a sin offering for the Lord,” suggesting that God Himself requires the sin offering *for* (His Own) atonement.

According to the Midrash, herein lies the idea of “a sin committed by the Almighty.” (The Hebrew word for “sin” is *chet*, which not only means a violation of God’s law, but has a broader meaning of causing an imperfection or wreaking damage.) God’s “sin” with respect to the New Moon is that He created the moon such that it decreases in size each month, until it “disappears” entirely, as it were. That is, according to the Midrash, the Almighty seems to be saying, “On each New Moon, offer a goat to atone for Me, and to honor and satisfy the moon, whose size I have reduced (in comparison with that of the sun).”

According to the Midrash, at the creation of the world God had originally planned to make the sun and the moon equal in size. But the moon found that unacceptable, arguing that “two kings cannot wear the same crown.” That is, where global dominion is concerned, equality cannot not work – only one ruler must be in charge at all times.

God accepted the moon’s argument, but the end result was quite different from what the moon had been hoping for: God reduced the moon, and the primary “dominion” went to the sun (Gen. 1:16-18).

That reduction of the moon in size and in importance is seen in some sense as an injustice that has endured in the world ever since the

Creation. But that injustice is felt most keenly once every month on the occasion of the new moon, when it is perceived as nothing less than a defect in the universe itself. The sin offering brought at each new moon serves to remind us of the wrongs, injustices, and imperfections of this world, and to inspire us to want to improve and correct the universe.<sup>75</sup>

### § 25.3. THE VERNAL FESTIVALS (28:16-31)

טז ובחדש הראשון בארבעה עשר יום לחדש פסח ליי: יז ובחמשה עשר יום לחדש הזה חג שבועת ימים מצות יאכל: יח ביום הראשון מקרא-קדש כל-מלאכת עבדה לא תעשו: יט והקרבתם אשה עלה ליי פרים בגי-בקר שנים ואיל אחד ושבעה כבשים בני שנה תמימים יהיו לכם: כ ומנחתם סלת בלולה בשמן שלשה עשרונים לפר ושני עשרונים לאיל תעשו: כא עשרון עשרון תעשה לכבש האחד לשבעת הכבשים: כב ושעיר חטאת אחד לכפר עליכם: כג מלבד עלת הבקר אשר לעלת התמיד תעשו את-אלה: כד כאלה תעשו ליום שבועת ימים לחם אשה ריח-ניחח ליי על-עולת התמיד יעשה ונסכו: כה וביום השביעי מקרא-קדש יהיה לכם כל-מלאכת עבדה לא תעשו:

כו וביום הבכורים בהקריבכם מנחה חדשה ליי בשבעתיכם מקרא-קדש יהיה לכם כל-מלאכת עבדה לא תעשו: כז והקרבתם עולה לריח ניחח ליי פרים בגי-בקר שנים איל אחד ושבעה כבשים בני שנה: כח ומנחתם סלת בלולה בשמן שלשה עשרונים לפר האחד שני עשרונים לאיל האחד: כט עשרון עשרון לכבש האחד לשבעת הכבשים: ל שעיר עזים אחד לכפר עליכם: לא מלבד עלת התמיד ומנחתו תעשו תמימים יהיו-לכם ונסביהם:

(16) In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, there shall be a passover sacrifice to the Lord,

(17) and on the fifteenth day of that month a festival. Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days.

<sup>75</sup> See Rashi's commentary on Gen. 1:16.

(18) **The first day shall be a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations.**

(19) **You shall present an offering by fire, a burnt offering, to the Lord: two bulls of the herd, one ram, and seven yearling lambs – see that they are without blemish.**

(20) **The meal offering with them shall be of choice flour with oil mixed in: prepare three-tenths of a measure for a bull, two-tenths for a ram;**

(21) **and for each of the seven lambs prepare one-tenth of a measure.**

(22) **And there shall be one goat for a sin offering, to make expiation in your behalf.**

(23) **You shall present these in addition to the morning portion of the regular burnt offering.**

(24) **You shall offer the like daily for seven days as food, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord; they shall be offered, with their libations, in addition to the regular burnt offering.**

(25) **And the seventh day shall be a sacred occasion for you: you shall not work at your occupations.**

(26) **On the day of the first fruits, your Feast of Weeks, when you bring an offering of new grain to the Lord, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations.**

(27) **You shall present a burnt offering of pleasing odor to the Lord: two bulls of the herd, one ram, seven yearling lambs.**

(28) **The meal offering with them shall be of choice flour with oil mixed in, three-tenths of a measure for a bull, two-tenths for a ram,**

(29) **and one-tenth for each of the seven lambs.**

(30) **And there shall be one goat for expiation in your behalf.**

(31) **You shall present them – see that they are without blemish – with their libations, in addition to the regular burnt offering and its meal offering.**

**(16) In the first month:** The festivals of this section are divided into two groups: the springtime festivals, which are associated with the first month of the Jewish year (Nisan), and the autumn festivals, associated with the seventh month of the year (Tishri). These two most significant periods in the Jewish calendar are complementarily opposite phases in the astronomical cycle that in turn drives the cycle of the seasons.

The springtime festivals, Passover and Shavuot, are the days on which the Jewish people became a nation, and then received the Torah. Thus, these are national, uniquely Jewish festivals. But the autumn festivals, on the other hand, relate to all of humanity and with the place that the Jewish people occupy within it.

**In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, there shall be a passover sacrifice to the Lord:** The word “sacrifice” does not appear in the original Hebrew of this verse; it is an interpolation by the translator – albeit a very necessary and correct one, as we shall now explain.

Actually, this verse simply says, “In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, there shall be a *pesach* to the Lord.” *Pesach* is the Hebrew word for Passover. Although today the word *pesach*, unqualified, is normally understood to mean, simply, the Passover festival, in ancient times this was not so. The word *pesach* then meant – first and foremost – the sacrifice, not the festival.

Thus, when this verse says, “On the fourteenth day of the month, there shall be a *pesach* to the Lord,” it means that the passover lamb should be slaughtered on the afternoon of the fourteenth day of the month, its blood then sprinkled on the altar in the Temple – which is what makes it an actual, formal “sacrifice” – and, finally, its meat eaten communally after nightfall. (The Passover evening meal that we now call the *Seder* has its ancient origins in that eating of the Passover sacrifice, which was then its true centerpiece.)

In that sense, then, the fourteenth day of the first month is, from the Torah’s point of view, integral to the observance of Passover, and is even seen as already the onset of Passover. In our times, however, since the Temple has not existed for almost two millennia, and the commandment of slaughtering and eating the Passover lamb can no

longer be observed, the fourteenth of Nisan is conventionally seen as not yet Passover, but only the “eve of Passover.”

Even so, it is important to realize that that perspective only reflects an unfortunate historical reality – that in these times the commandment to slaughter and eat the Passover sacrifice, one of Judaism’s most fundamental commandments, cannot be fulfilled. But the Torah’s perspective on the significance of the fourteenth day of Nisan, as seen in this verse, is entirely different.

**(17) And on the fifteenth day of that month a festival; unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days:** Although Passover, practically speaking, is all one festival, it has two distinct components, and can be seen as combining what are in fact two different festivals: the Feast of the Passover Sacrifice, and the Feast of (eating) Unleavened Bread.

The *Pesach* sacrifice component, which begins on the fourteenth day of Nisan, commemorates the deliverance by the Almighty of the Jewish firstborns when the Egyptian firstborns were mortally smitten. At that very first Passover sacrifice, which was performed in Egypt the night before the Exodus, we read in the Torah: “Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood [of the lamb] that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts. None of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning. For when the Lord goes through to smite the Egyptians, He will see the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, and the Lord will pass over the door and not let the Destroyer enter and smite your home” (Exod. 12:22-23).

The second component, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, begins the following day, and is celebrated in remembrance of the actual Exodus from Egypt, which took place on the fifteenth of Nisan (Exod. 12:51, Num. 33:3).

**(18) The first day shall be a sacred occasion:** The first day and last (seventh) day of *Pesach* are festivals in the fullest sense, whereas the days in between are called *Chol Ha-Moed*, “festival weekdays.” Although the Torah does not prohibit performing constructive labor of any kind on those middle days, certain types of work are forbidden by

a decree of the Sages even on those days out of respect for the festival, and in order to promote and facilitate enjoyment of the holiday.

You shall not work at your occupations: There are two different formulations of the prohibition of work on holy days. With respect to Shabbat and Yom Kippur the Torah says, “Do no work (*melachah*) whatever” (Lev. 23:3, 31). But on the festivals the prohibition is expressed as “Do not work at your occupations (*melecheth avodah*)” (Lev. 23:7).

Tradition understands this distinction as reducing the scope of the prohibition of performing constructive labor on festivals. Specifically, on any festival (except Yom Kippur) that falls on a weekday, cooking is permitted, because eating delicious food is an essential component of experiencing the joy of the holiday.

**The Torah itself makes this distinction between food preparation and all other activities:** “You shall celebrate a sacred occasion on the first day, and a sacred occasion on the seventh day; no work at all shall be done on them; only what every person is to eat, that alone may be prepared for you” (Exod. 12:16). Although this food-related leniency was said with respect to Passover specifically, it applies to all other festivals (except Yom Kippur) as well.

**(19) You shall present an offering by fire, a burnt offering, to the Lord: two bulls of the herd, one ram, and seven yearling lambs:** Like the New Moon sacrifices, the sacrifices brought on all the springtime festivals express a connection with the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

**(20-21) The meal offering with them shall be of choice flour with oil mixed in: prepare three-tenths of a measure for a bull, two-tenths for a ram; and for each of the seven lambs prepare one-tenth of a measure:** All the ancillaries of flour, olive oil, and wine for the *musaf* sacrifices of the Festivals are analogous to those of the New Moon.

**(22) And there shall be one goat for a sin offering, to make expiation in your behalf:** As already mentioned, this offering too is the same on all festivals. It atones for the sins of the priests and Levites, who might have inadvertently entered the Temple in a state of ritual uncleanness.

**(23) You shall present these in addition to the morning portion of the regular burnt offering:** Here again the general principle remains the same. The two daily, *tamid*, “perpetual” sacrifices are the foundation of the day’s offerings. The *musaf* sacrifices, when applicable, are added on top of them, to be brought after the morning *tamid*.

**(24) You shall offer the like daily for seven days:** On the festival of Sukkot, as we shall see (Num. 29:12-34 below), the *musaf* sacrifices are different on each of the seven days. But on Passover, unlike Sukkot, the *musaf* sacrifices are the same on all seven days. Later, in our discussion of Sukkot, we shall suggest a rationale for this prominent difference between these two seven-day festivals in the Jewish calendar.

**(25) And the seventh day shall be a sacred occasion for you: you shall not work at your occupations:** One might ask: Passover of course commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, and is therefore observed yearly on the date of the Exodus (the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan) in the Jewish calendar, but why does the Torah declare also the seventh day of Passover a major festival? What is the special significance of that day?

The answer is that the seventh day of Passover commemorates the splitting of the Sea of Reeds (Exod. 14), which according to Tradition occurred on the seventh day following the Exodus from Egypt. It was a miraculous deliverance at least as great as the Exodus itself.

**(26) On your Feast of Weeks:** The words “Feast of” do not appear in the Hebrew, which reads, simply, *be-shavuoteichem*, literally, “on your weeks.”

*Shavuot* is a very common word in Hebrew, meaning, simply, “weeks.” The name of this festival, the “Feast of Weeks” derives from the fact that it is always observed exactly seven weeks after the second day of Passover.

According to Tradition, Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. As the Torah reports (Exod. 19:1), the Revelation at Sinai occurred at the beginning of the third month, or some seven weeks, following the Exodus. (The Written Torah does not tell us the exact date of the giving of the Torah at Sinai.)

Shavuot is in fact the only one of the festivals for which no actual date (month and day) is prescribed. Rather, “[From Passover] you must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days” (Lev. 23:16).

Shavuot is then observed on that fiftieth day. This demonstrates and emphasizes that Shavuot is not its own independent festival, but a continuation of (and the completion of) Passover.

**On the day of the first fruits:** From the perspective of the Written Torah, Shavuot is the festival of bringing the first fruits of the new harvest to the Temple.

“When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it, you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name” (Deut. 26:1-2).

Thus, the Written Torah does not explicitly link the festival of Shavuot to the day of the Giving of the Torah. Only the Oral Torah makes that connection.

**(26) When you bring an offering of new grain:** The words “of new grain” do not appear here in the Torah text, which says, simply, “when you bring a new offering.” However, the Torah here relies on passages in its other books to make clear what that “new offering” was. (Moreover, although *minchah*, the Hebrew word used here for “offering,” very often means an offering or gift in general, the same word *minchah* also very often refers to a meal offering – that is, an offering of grain – specifically.)

The book of Leviticus (23:15-17) is somewhat more explicit than this verse, indicating that the “new offering” of this festival consists of two loaves of bread made from the new grain harvest. And finally, in the book of Exodus (34:22), where Shavuot is called “the Festival of the first fruits of the wheat harvest,” we learn what kind of grain is meant.

**(27) You shall present a burnt offering of pleasing odor to the Lord: two bulls of the herd, one ram, seven yearling lambs:** The sacrifices of Shavuot are identical to those of all the days of Passover. In this sense too, and as already mentioned, the festival of Shavuot is actually the completion of Passover.

**(31) You shall present them – see that they are without blemish – with their libations, in addition to the regular burnt offering and its meal offering:** Notwithstanding the translation given here, this verse in the Hebrew is worded somewhat differently, literally: “In

addition to the regular burnt offering and its meal offering shall you perform [these Shavuot *musaf* offerings]. They shall be without blemish for you, and their libations.”

Those last words can also be read as “They and their libations shall be without blemish for you.” Thus, “without blemish” can be understood as referring not only to the sacrificial animals (the obvious meaning), but also to their libations – the supplements of flour, oil, and wine.

On the other hand, although the word *ve-niskeihem*, “and their libations,” refers broadly to all three of those supplements, more strictly it means the wine specifically. Tradition concludes from this that the wine used for the libations that accompany the sacrifices must be “without blemish,” that is, of the very highest quality. In particular, *yayin mevushal*, “boiled wine,” or wine that has been diluted with other beverages, or wine whose quality has been impaired due to improper storage, must not be used for the sacrificial libations.

#### § 25.4. THE AUTUMN FESTIVALS (29:1-38)

א וּבַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ מִקְרָא-קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל-מִלְאכָתָ עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ יוֹם תְּרוּעָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם: ב וְעֲשִׂיתֶם עֹלָה לְרִיחַ נִיחֹחַ לַיִּי פֶרֶךְ-בֶּזֶק אֶחָד אֵיל אֶחָד כֶּבֶשִׂים בְּנֵי-שָׁנָה שְׁבַע תְּמִימִם: ג וּמִנְחֹתֶם סֶלֶת בָּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן שְׁלֹשָׁה עֶשְׂרִים לֶפֶר שְׁנֵי עֶשְׂרִים לֶאֱיִל: ד וְעֲשֶׂרוֹן אֶחָד לִכְבֵּשׁ הָאֶחָד לְשִׁבְעַת הַכֶּבֶשִׂים: ה וְשְׂעִיר-עִזִּים אֶחָד חֲטָאת לִכְפֹּר עֲלֵיכֶם: ו מִלֶּבֶד עֹלֹת הַחֹדֶשׁ וּמִנְחֹתָהּ וְעֹלֹת הַתָּמִיד וּמִנְחֹתָהּ וְנִסְכֵיהֶם כַּמִּשְׁפָּטִים לְרִיחַ נִיחֹחַ אִשָּׁה לַיִּי:

ז וּבַעֲשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה מִקְרָא-קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם וְעֲנִיתֶם אֶת-נִפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם כָּל-מִלְאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ: ח וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם עֹלָה לַיִּי רִיחַ נִיחֹחַ פֶּרֶךְ-בֶּזֶק אֶחָד אֵיל אֶחָד כֶּבֶשִׂים בְּנֵי-שָׁנָה שְׁבַע תְּמִימִם יִהְיוּ לָכֶם: ט וּמִנְחֹתֶם סֶלֶת בָּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן שְׁלֹשָׁה עֶשְׂרִים לֶפֶר שְׁנֵי עֶשְׂרִים לֶאֱיִל הָאֶחָד: י עֲשֶׂרוֹן עֲשֶׂרוֹן לִכְבֵּשׁ הָאֶחָד לְשִׁבְעַת הַכֶּבֶשִׂים: יא שְׂעִיר-עִזִּים אֶחָד חֲטָאת מִלֶּבֶד חֲטָאת הַכִּפָּרִים וְעֹלֹת הַתָּמִיד וּמִנְחֹתָהּ וְנִסְכֵיהֶם:

יב וּבַחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִקְרֵא-קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל-  
 מְלֹאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּחֻגְתֶּם חֹג לִי שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: יג וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם  
 עֹלָה אִשָּׁה רֵיחַ נִיחֹחַ לִי פָרִים בְּנֵי-בָקָר שְׁלֹשָׁה עֶשְׂרֵי אֵילִם שְׁנָיִם  
 כִּבְשִׂים בְּנֵי-שָׁנָה אַרְבָּעָה עֶשְׂרֵי תְּמִימִם יִהְיוּ: יד וּמִנְחֹתֶם סֹלֶת בָּלוּלָה  
 בְּשֶׁמֶן שְׁלֹשָׁה עֶשְׂרֹנִים לִפְרֵי הָאֶחָד לְשֹׁלֶשֶׁה עֶשְׂרֵי פָרִים שְׁנֵי עֶשְׂרֹנִים  
 לְאֵיל הָאֶחָד לְשְׁנֵי הָאֵילִם: טו וְעֶשְׂרוֹן עֶשְׂרוֹן לִכְבֹּשׂ הָאֶחָד לְאַרְבָּעָה  
 עֶשְׂרֵי כִבְשִׂים: טז וְשְׁעִיר-עִזִּים אֶחָד חֲטָאת מִלֶּבֶד עֹלֹת הַתָּמִיד  
 מִנְחָתָהּ וְנִסְכָּהּ:

יז וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁנַיִ פָּרִים בְּנֵי-בָקָר שְׁנָיִם עֶשְׂרֵי אֵילִם שְׁנָיִם כִּבְשִׂים בְּנֵי-  
 שָׁנָה אַרְבָּעָה עֶשְׂרֵי תְּמִימִם: יח וּמִנְחֹתֶם וְנִסְכֵיהֶם לְפָרִים לְאֵילִם  
 וְלִכְבָּשִׂים בְּמִסְפָּרָם כַּמִּשְׁפָּט: יט וְשְׁעִיר-עִזִּים אֶחָד חֲטָאת מִלֶּבֶד  
 עֹלֹת הַתָּמִיד וּמִנְחָתָהּ וְנִסְכֵיהֶם:

כ,כ ובַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי פָּרִים עֶשְׂתֵי-עֶשְׂרֵי אֵילִם שְׁנָיִם כִּבְשִׂים בְּנֵי-שָׁנָה  
 אַרְבָּעָה עֶשְׂרֵי תְּמִימִם: כא וּמִנְחֹתֶם וְנִסְכֵיהֶם לְפָרִים לְאֵילִם וְלִכְבָּשִׂים  
 בְּמִסְפָּרָם כַּמִּשְׁפָּט: כב וְשְׁעִיר חֲטָאת אֶחָד מִלֶּבֶד עֹלֹת הַתָּמִיד  
 וּמִנְחָתָהּ וְנִסְכָּהּ:

כג ובַּיּוֹם הָרִבְעִי פָּרִים עֶשְׂרֵה אֵילִם שְׁנָיִם כִּבְשִׂים בְּנֵי-שָׁנָה אַרְבָּעָה  
 עֶשְׂרֵי תְּמִימִם: כד מִנְחֹתֶם וְנִסְכֵיהֶם לְפָרִים לְאֵילִם וְלִכְבָּשִׂים בְּמִסְפָּרָם  
 כַּמִּשְׁפָּט: כה וְשְׁעִיר-עִזִּים אֶחָד חֲטָאת מִלֶּבֶד עֹלֹת הַתָּמִיד מִנְחָתָהּ  
 וְנִסְכָּהּ:

כו ובַּיּוֹם הַחֲמִישִׁי פָּרִים תְּשֻׁעָה אֵילִם שְׁנָיִם כִּבְשִׂים בְּנֵי-שָׁנָה אַרְבָּעָה  
 עֶשְׂרֵי תְּמִימִם: כז מִנְחֹתֶם וְנִסְכֵיהֶם לְפָרִים לְאֵילִם וְלִכְבָּשִׂים בְּמִסְפָּרָם  
 כַּמִּשְׁפָּט: כח וְשְׁעִיר חֲטָאת אֶחָד מִלֶּבֶד עֹלֹת הַתָּמִיד וּמִנְחָתָהּ וְנִסְכָּהּ:

כט ובַּיּוֹם הַשֵּׁשִׁי פָּרִים שְׁמֹנֶה אֵילִם שְׁנָיִם כִּבְשִׂים בְּנֵי-שָׁנָה אַרְבָּעָה  
 עֶשְׂרֵי תְּמִימִם: ל וּמִנְחֹתֶם וְנִסְכֵיהֶם לְפָרִים לְאֵילִם וְלִכְבָּשִׂים בְּמִסְפָּרָם  
 כַּמִּשְׁפָּט: לא וְשְׁעִיר חֲטָאת אֶחָד מִלֶּבֶד עֹלֹת הַתָּמִיד מִנְחָתָהּ וְנִסְכָּהּ:

לב ובַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי פָּרִים שִׁבְעָה אֵילִם שְׁנָיִם כִּבְשִׂים בְּנֵי-שָׁנָה אַרְבָּעָה  
 עֶשְׂרֵי תְּמִימִם: לג מִנְחֹתֶם וְנִסְכֵיהֶם לְפָרִים לְאֵילִם וְלִכְבָּשִׂים בְּמִסְפָּרָם  
 כַּמִּשְׁפָּט: לד וְשְׁעִיר חֲטָאת אֶחָד מִלֶּבֶד עֹלֹת הַתָּמִיד מִנְחָתָהּ וְנִסְכָּהּ:

לה בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי עֲצַרְתָּ תִּהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל-מְלֹאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא  
 תַעֲשׂוּ: לו וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם עֹלָה אִשָּׁה רֵיחַ נִיחֹחַ לִי פֶרֶ אֶחָד אֵיל אֶחָד

כְּבָשִׂים בַּגֵּי-שָׁנָה שְׁבַעַה תְּמִימִם: לוֹ מִנְחָתָם וְנִסְכֵיהֶם לֶפָר לְאֵיל  
וְלִכְבָּשִׂים בְּמִסְפָּרָם כַּמִּשְׁפָּט: לח וּשְׁעִיר חַטָּאת אֶחָד מִלְבָּד עֲלֵת  
הַתְּמִיד וּמִנְחָתָהּ וְנִסְכָּה:

- (1) In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded.
- (2) You shall present a burnt offering of pleasing odor to the Lord: one bull of the herd, one ram, and seven yearling lambs, without blemish.
- (3) The meal offering with them – choice flour with oil mixed in – shall be: three-tenths of a measure for a bull, two-tenths for a ram,
- (4) and one-tenth for each of the seven lambs.
- (5) And there shall be one goat for a sin offering, to make expiation in your behalf –
- (6) in addition to the burnt offering of the new moon with its meal offering and the regular burnt offering with its meal offering, each with its libation as prescribed, offerings by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord.
- (7) On the tenth day of the same seventh month you shall observe a sacred occasion when you shall practice self-denial. You shall do no work.
- (8) You shall present to the Lord a burnt offering of pleasing odor: one bull of the herd, one ram, seven yearling lambs; see that they are without blemish.
- (9) The meal offering with them – of choice flour with oil mixed in – shall be: three-tenths of a measure for a bull, two-tenths for the one ram,
- (10) one-tenth for each of the seven lambs.
- (11) And there shall be one goat for a sin offering, in addition to the sin offering of expiation and the regular burnt offering with its meal offering, each with its libation.

(12) **On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. – Seven days you shall observe a festival of the Lord. –**

(13) **You shall present a burnt offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord: Thirteen bulls of the herd, two rams, fourteen yearling lambs; they shall be without blemish.**

(14) **The meal offerings with them – of choice flour with oil mixed in – shall be: three-tenths of a measure for each of the thirteen bulls, two-tenths for each of the two rams,**

(15) **and one-tenth for each of the fourteen lambs.**

(16) **And there shall be one goat for a sin offering – in addition to the regular burnt offering, its meal offering and libation.**

(17) **Second day: Twelve bulls of the herd, two rams, fourteen yearling lambs, without blemish;**

(18) **the meal offerings and libations for the bulls, rams, and lambs, in the quantities prescribed;**

(19) **and one goat for a sin offering – in addition to the regular burnt offering, its meal offering and libations.**

(20) **Third day: Eleven bulls, two rams, fourteen yearling lambs, without blemish;**

(21) **the meal offerings and libations for the bulls, rams, and lambs, in the quantities prescribed;**

(22) **and one goat for a sin offering – in addition to the regular burnt offering, its meal offering and libation.**

(23) **Fourth day: Ten bulls, two rams, fourteen yearling lambs, without blemish;**

(24) **the meal offerings and libations for the bulls, rams, and lambs, in the quantities prescribed;**

(25) **and one goat for a sin offering – in addition to the regular burnt offering, its meal offering and libation.**

(26) **Fifth day: Nine bulls, two rams, fourteen yearling lambs, without blemish;**

- (27) the meal offerings and libations for the bulls, rams, and lambs, in the quantities prescribed;
- (28) and one goat for a sin offering – in addition to the regular burnt offering, its meal offering and libation.
- (29) Sixth day: Eight bulls, two rams, fourteen yearling lambs, without blemish;
- (30) the meal offerings and libations for the bulls, rams, and lambs, in the quantities prescribed;
- (31) and one goat for a sin offering – in addition to the regular burnt offering, its meal offering and libations.
- (32) Seventh day: Seven bulls, two rams, fourteen yearling lambs, without blemish;
- (33) the meal offerings and libations for the bulls, rams, and lambs, in the quantities prescribed;
- (34) and one goat for a sin offering – in addition to the regular burnt offering, its meal offering and libation.
- (35) On the eighth day you shall hold a solemn gathering; you shall not work at your occupations.
- (36) You shall present a burnt offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord; one bull, one ram, seven yearling lambs, without blemish;
- (37) the meal offerings and libations for the bull, the ram, and the lambs, in the quantities prescribed;
- (38) and one goat for a sin offering – in addition to the regular burnt offering, its meal offering and libation.

**(1) In the seventh month:** All the autumn festivals occur in the seventh month, Tishri. According to Tradition, the character of those festivals is universal (rather than relating to the Jewish people specifically). The autumn festivals emphasize God’s connection with all of humanity, and the place of the Jewish people within it.

The sequence of these three autumn festivals (the fourth and final autumn festival – *Shemini Atzeret* – is discussed in the commentary to Num. 29:2 below) is laid out in this chapter as follows:

- (i) Rosh Hashanah – “a day when the horn is sounded” (Num. 29:1).
- (ii) Yom Kippur – a day of self-denial and expiation (Num. 29:7, 11).
- (iii) Sukkot – a seven-day festival of joy (Num. 29:12).

Tradition presents this sequence as corresponding to the stages of human history:

- (i) Rosh Hashanah – the birth of the world and the creation of humankind.
- (ii) Yom Kippur – a day of atonement and purification, as expressed in the one-day separation of the Jewish people from humanity, in order to establish and affirm their connection with the Almighty.
- (iii) Sukkot – an opportunity for all of mankind to be joined to the Jewish people and, through them, to the Almighty.

**In the seventh month:** The number seven was laid at the Creation of the world as one of the foundations of nature (the clearest expression of which is the Sabbath, which is observed every seven days without fail). The number seven is emphasized in this chapter as the structural basis for the entire system of the Jewish festivals. Their sequence begins with the Exodus. The seventh day following the Exodus is the seventh and final day of Passover. Seven weeks after the Exodus the Feast of Weeks, Shavuot, is celebrated. And the seventh month following the Exodus is Tishri, the month in which all the autumn festivals are observed.

**On the first day of the month:** This holy day later came to be known as Rosh Hashanah (literally, “the beginning of the year”) – Jewish New Year.

**You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded:** Blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is not merely a nice custom, but a fundamental Torah commandment that expresses the very essence of the day. This trumpeting has a number of meanings, some universal and some that relate to the Jewish people specifically.

- (i) Tradition identifies this day, the first of Tishri, with the sixth day of Creation, the day on which God made man (Gen. 1:27). Having done so, the Almighty had subjects, and thus He officially became King over the entire world. Thus, the shofar is blown on Rosh Hashanah in the manner that trumpets are blown for

a king ascending the throne, in order to assert and confirm his dominion.

(ii) The blowing of the shofar evokes those feelings of awe and trepidation that the moment of the Divine judgment of humanity inspires. All of God's kingdom is united in judgment on this day.

(iii) For the Jewish people, the ram's horn recalls *Akeidat Yitzchak*, the Binding of Isaac (Gen. 22), where at the last moment, Isaac was spared from becoming a sacrifice, and a ram was offered in his place.

(iv) The shofar of Rosh Hashanah is also a "shofar of freedom." (Not only on Rosh Hashanah, but three times every weekday of the year, Jews petition God: "Sound the great shofar for our liberty, and raise a banner to gather our exiles.") According to Tradition, six months before the Exodus – on this date, the first of Tishri – the forced labor of the Jewish people enslaved under Pharaoh in Egypt completely ceased.

**(2) You shall present a burnt offering of pleasing odor to the Lord:** one bull of the herd: In contrast to the springtime festivals, on which the number of animals of the *musaf* sacrifices is constant, the *musafim* of the autumn festivals vary according to the day. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur one bull is brought. Throughout Sukkot there are many bulls (a different number each day). And on *Shemini Atzeret*, again one bull.

This difference can be understood as follows. As already mentioned, the festivals of the spring, which are of a national (Jewish) character, are associated with the Patriarchs, historical personalities whose significance is constant. But conversely, the autumn festivals and their sacrifices have a different symbolism, i.e., they emphasize the connection of the Jewish people to all of mankind, a relationship that continues to develop as history unfolds. The sacrifices of the autumn therefore have likewise a variable character.

The bulls of Sukkot decrease by one on each of the seven days, beginning with thirteen bulls on the first day, and ending with seven bulls on the seventh and final day of Sukkot. Thus, the total number of Sukkot bulls (13 + 12 + 11 + 10 + 9 + 8 + 7) is seventy, which tradition

sees as representing the seventy nations of the world that descended from Noah (Gen. 10). Thus, in the symbolism of the autumn festivals, the bulls represent the nations of the world, unlike the bulls of the spring festivals, which are a remembrance of Abraham (Gen. 15:9, 18:7).

The dynamics of the bulls that are sacrificed on the autumn festivals can be understood as follows.

Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the human race. At first all of humanity is one, represented by one bull.

The centerpiece of the Temple service on Yom Kippur is sending the *sa'ir la-'azazel*, the "scapegoat," into the wilderness (Lev. 16:21-22). The Kabbalah associates the *sa'ir la-'azazel* with Esau, who is called *sa'ir*, "hairy" (Gen. 27:11). Moreover, the land on which Esau settled bore the very similar name Seir (Gen. 36:8). Thus, the sending of the scapegoat into the wilderness on Yom Kippur is seen as the moment of separating Jacob from Esau, which corresponds to the moment of the birth of Israel, the only nation in the world that merits a special connection with the Almighty. Therefore, the bull of the Yom Kippur *musaf* sacrifice is also one.

Sukkot presages the gradual approach of the peoples of the world to Israel, through whom they come to recognize the Almighty. But the nations adopt the Jewish idea differently – not all in the same manner and not all at the same time. Therefore, the number of *musaf* bulls on each of the days of Sukkot varies. But at the same time, over the seven days of Sukkot that number decreases steadily (by one each day, from thirteen to seven); that is, fewer and fewer peoples remain outside the connection with their Creator.

And finally, the eighth day, *Shemini Atzeret*, the conclusion of the autumn festivals, symbolizes the end of that process, when the entire world will become one in its connection with the Almighty: "And the Lord shall be king over all the earth; in that day there shall be one Lord with one name" (Zech. 14:9). The single bull of this day corresponds to that universal state of oneness with the Creator.

**(6) In addition to the burnt offering of the new moon with its meal offering and the regular burnt offering with its meal offering:** Rosh Hashanah is the only one of the festivals that falls at the very beginning of the month. That is, Rosh Hashanah is always also

*Rosh Chodesh*, the New Moon. And therefore, three “layers” of sacrifices are offered on this day: the daily perpetual sacrifice (Num. 28:1 ff.), the *musaf* sacrifices of the New Moon (Num. 28:11 ff.), and the special *musaf* sacrifices of Rosh Hashanah just enumerated above (Num. 29:2).

In Temple times, in the event that Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbat, there would be not three but four layers of sacrifices, because the *musaf* sacrifices of Shabbat (Num. 28:9-10) would also be offered. But this verse does not mention that, because Rosh Hashanah falling on Shabbat is not a yearly occurrence.

**(7,11) On the tenth day of the same seventh month you shall observe a sacred occasion ... in addition to the sin offering of expiation:** This special day, the tenth day of the month of Tishri, is generally known as Yom Kippur, the “Day of Atonement.”

**(7) When you shall practice self-denial:** The Torah here informs us that fasting is mandatory on Yom Kippur. The Oral Tradition further elaborates on this “self-denial,” explaining that it actually includes five different prohibitions: “On Yom Kippur, it is prohibited to eat or drink, to bathe, to anoint oneself, to wear leather shoes, and to engage in conjugal relations” (Mishnah, Yoma 8:1).

**(7) You shall do no work:** Unlike the other festivals, on which (unless they fall on Shabbat) only constructive labor is forbidden, on Yom Kippur all work is forbidden, just as it is on Shabbat. Indeed, Yom Kippur, even when it falls in the middle of the week, is in fact Shabbat. Twice the Torah calls Yom Kippur *shabbat shabbaton*, the “ultimate Shabbat” (Lev. 16:31, 23:32.)

**(11) And there shall be one goat for a sin offering, in addition to the sin offering of expiation:** That is, Yom Kippur too requires the sin-offering of a goat that is common to the New Moon and all the festivals (see above, Num. 29:15). However, on Yom Kippur that goat is offered in addition to yet another goat, also a sin offering.

The Yom Kippur service in the Temple, as described in Leviticus, requires that a pair of goats be designated, with the ultimate disposition of each being determined by lot. One goat of that pair became the “Azazel” goat, the scapegoat that was sent out into the wilderness to meet its end. And its “twin,” the second goat of that pair, was sacrificed

in the Temple as a sin offering (Lev. 16:9). The “sin offering of expiation” mentioned in this verse is that second goat of the pair.

**(12) On the fifteenth day of the seventh ... Seven days you shall observe a festival of the Lord:** For all the other festivals, the Torah in this chapter indicates some aspect of each that is specific only to it. On Passover – the Passover lamb and eating matzah. On Shavuot – the bringing of the first fruits and the offering of new grain. On Rosh Hashanah – the blowing of the shofar. And Yom Kippur – a day of self-denial and atonement.

But here in this paragraph, nothing specific to the observance of Sukkot is mentioned, except “Seven days you shall observe a festival of the Lord.” In the Hebrew, however, this is much more emphatic – *ve-chaggotem chag*, literally, “you shall celebrate a celebration.” This apparent redundancy emphasizes that, indeed, Sukkot too has its own theme specific to it – the commandment of consummate, unbounded rejoicing.

Although there is a commandment to rejoice on every one of the festivals, the rejoicing on Sukkot is expected to be even greater, and the Torah here deems that rejoicing *the* defining aspect of the festival. And this notwithstanding that the Festival of Sukkot too does in fact have its own very distinctive commandments – the taking of the four plant species (Lev. 24:40), and dwelling in *sukkot*, huts or booths, for seven days (Lev. 24:42), whence is derived this festival’s conventional name, Sukkot, the Festival of Booths.

And yet there is no mention here of those commandments, nor does the Torah here even call this festival by its usual name, Sukkot. It only defines this festival as an occasion for seven days of unmitigated joy. So, what is this supreme joy really about?

Sukkot (like the other two of the three “Pilgrimage Festivals,” Passover and Shavuot) has obvious agricultural associations. Elsewhere in the Torah, Sukkot is called, simply, “The Feast of Ingathering”: “And the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in the results of your work from the field” (Exod. 23:16, 34:22).

We see clearly that the unbounded rejoicing of Sukkot is associated with the abundance of the annual harvest. “After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths

for seven days. You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities” (Deut. 16:13-14). Thus, the rejoicing of Sukkot is an expression of gratitude to God for the blessings of material abundance that He has bestowed, and of satisfaction and pride in having been found worthy in His eyes to receive those blessings.

Finally, it may be noted that the rejoicing of Sukkot as reflected in the verses cited above is mainly of a family and personal nature. However, the celebration of Sukkot eventually took on a communal, even national character as well, as epitomized by the celebrations that took place in the Temple, and in Jerusalem as a whole, on Sukkot, as described in tractate Sukkah of the Talmud. Says the Mishnah there (Sukkah 5:1): “Whosoever did not see this celebration never saw a real celebration in his entire life.”

**On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, you shall observe a sacred occasion:** you shall not work at your occupations: The first of the seven days of Sukkot, and the eighth day – which is its own independent festival, *Shemini Atzeret* – are festivals in the fullest sense. Constructive and occupational labors are forbidden on those days, while work activities that would be forbidden on the Sabbath, but are necessary for food preparation, are in general permitted on festivals (provided they fall on a weekday and not on Shabbat).

The other, intermediate days of Sukkot are *Chol Ha-Moed*, “festival weekdays,” on which almost all manner of work is permitted (especially if its performance cannot be postponed until after the festival without causing significant loss). In this respect, the structure of Sukkot is similar to that of Passover.

**(13, 17, 20, 23, 26, 29, 32) You shall present a burnt offering ... Thirteen bulls of the herd ... Second day: Twelve bulls of the herd ... Third day: Eleven bulls ... Fourth day: Ten bulls ... Fifth day: Nine bulls... Sixth day: Eight bulls... Seventh day: Seven bulls:** As noted earlier, Sukkot is understood by tradition as a festival that connects the nations of the world with the Almighty by connecting the nations of the world with the Jewish people and Jewish ideals.

The number of bulls sacrificed on the seven days of Sukkot therefore varies according to the day, just as the connection of the nations of the world to the Almighty and to the Jewish people is not uniform. However, the total number of bulls sacrificed over the seven days of Sukkot is always seventy, corresponding to the nations of the world, which according to Jewish tradition are likewise seventy in number. (As enumerated in Gen. 10, these are the nations that descended from Noah's three sons after the flood.) Thus, the seventy bulls that Israel is commanded to sacrifice in the Temple on Sukkot are seen as petitioning God for the well-being, physical and spiritual, of the entire human race.

“Rabbi Yochanan said: ‘Woe unto the nations of the world who have lost, but do not even know what they have lost. When the Temple was standing, the seventy bulls sacrificed on the altar during the festival of Sukkot atoned for them. But now that they have destroyed God’s Temple, who atones for them?’ ” (Talmud, Sukkah 55b).

**(35) On the eighth day you shall hold a solemn gathering; you shall not work at your occupations:** This eighth day, known as *Shemini Atzeret*, completes the cycle of the autumn festivals.

The name *Shemini Atzeret* derives from the words of this verse itself: “On the eighth (*shemini*) day you shall hold a solemn gathering (*‘atzeret*).” The straightforward meaning of *atzeret* is an “assembly” or “gathering” of persons for a particular purpose. However, the verbal root of the Hebrew word *‘atzeret*, literally means to “hold back” or “restrain” something or someone. An alternate homiletic interpretation of the name of this festival, *Shemini Atzeret*, is therefore given as follows.

Sukkot is one of the three “Pilgrimage Festivals” of the year, on which all Jews are commanded to ascend to Jerusalem and spend time there. Thus, as the seven days of Sukkot draw to a close, and the people prepare to leave Jerusalem and return to their year-round abodes, the Almighty is aggrieved, as it were, that His children will not return again for another six or seven months (i.e., for the next of the three Pilgrimage Festivals, which is Passover). And so He says to them, “Your departure is so grievous to Me. Please don’t leave Me yet. Won’t you stay at least just one more day?”

Thus, the Almighty has mandated one final day of festivity, *Shemini Atzeret*, the eighth day, on which, in His love for the Jewish people, He

“restrains” them from departing, in order to enjoy their company and their presence just a little bit longer.

**(36) You shall present ... one bull:** This one bull symbolizes the unity of all of mankind with God. That unity will be achieved only in the Messianic era.

§ 25.5. THE CYCLE OF THE FESTIVALS AND THEIR  
SACRIFICES CONCLUDED (29:39-30:1)

לֹט אֵלֶּה תַעֲשׂוּ לַיְי בְּמוֹעֲדֵיכֶם לְבַד מִנְדָּרֵיכֶם וְנִדְבָתֵיכֶם לְעֹלֹתֵיכֶם  
וְלִמְנַחְתֵיכֶם וְלִנְסֻכֵיכֶם וְלִשְׁלָמֵיכֶם:  
א וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּכֵל אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יְי אֶת־מֹשֶׁה:

**(39) All these you shall offer to the Lord at the stated times, in addition to your votive and freewill offerings, be they burnt offerings, meal offerings, libations, or offerings of well-being.**

**(30:1) So Moses spoke to the Israelites just as the Lord had commanded Moses.**

**(39) All these you shall offer to the Lord at the stated times, in addition to your votive and freewill offerings, be they burnt offerings, meal offerings, libations, or offerings of well-being:** In addition to the sacrifices mentioned in these two chapters – cyclically recurring sacrifices obligatory upon the entire community of Israel – there are many other types of sacrifices that have not been mentioned in these chapters.

A prime example is the “offering of well-being,” *shelamim*, very often translated as “peace offering”, because of the close relationship of the word *shelamim* to *shalom*, “peace.” Such *shelamim* sacrifices, although they too are obligatory during the Pilgrimage Festivals, are obligatory at the individual, not the communal or national level.

After a formal *shelamim* sacrifice is performed, the meat of the sacrifice is eaten by the person who has offered it, and by his family members. Enjoying the meat of *shelamim* sacrifices is in fact a primary component of the rejoicing on the major festivals: “Wrap up the money

and take it with you to the place that the Lord your God has chosen, and spend the money on anything you want – cattle, sheep, wine, or other intoxicant, or anything you may desire. And you shall feast there, in the presence of the Lord your God, and rejoice with your household” (Deut. 14:25-26).

However, the two chapters here ending are meant to cover only the fundamental recurring cycle of daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly communal sacrifices that form the basis of self-identification at the national level. In order to make that distinction clear, the chapter ends with a note emphasizing that there are many other offerings and sacrifices – including a variety of sacrifices brought by individuals – that did not have a place for mention in the context of these two chapters.

**(30:1) So Moses spoke to the Israelites just as the Lord had commanded Moses:** Moses relayed all of the above to the Israelites – not to the priests. In the perspective of these two chapters, as noted earlier, the sacrifices that have been described are brought by the people, not by the priests. Of course it is the priests who actually perform all these sacrifices. But as concerns these national-communal offerings, the priests are seen as performing a purely technical function.

**WEEKLY  
PORTION 9**

**MATTOT**



## § 26. VOWS AND OATHS

### § 26.1. WEEKLY PORTIONS *MATTOT* AND *MAS'EI* – REBUILDING THE NATION AFTER THE WILDERNESS YEARS

As noted earlier, after the nation has undergone a new census in weekly portion 8, Pinchas, which marks the end of the journey through the wilderness, and is a measure of the people's correction in the process of that transition, weekly portions 9 and 10, *Mattot* and *Mas'ei*, the last two portions of the book of Numbers, are devoted to the “recovery from treatment.”

Having experienced and surmounted all the difficulties of the wilderness journey, the people are renewed, and they now have what it will take to to conquer the Land of Israel. But although the “treatment” itself is complete, the people still need to recover, as it were, from its side effects, and this is the subject of the two final portions.

The most complex and problematic moment here is the war with Midian.

### § 26.2. INDEPENDENCE IN EXPERIENCING REVELATION AS THE NATION APPROACHES THE LAND OF ISRAEL

The *Mattot* portion begins with the words, “Moses spoke to the heads of the Israelite tribes, saying: This is what the Lord has commanded” (Num. 30:2). This formulation is unusual. Almost all earlier similar instructions in the Torah begin with the words, “The

Lord spoke to Moses, saying.” Here however, there is no mention at all of God having addressed Moses, while Moses’ own role is given significantly more weight.

This shows that Moses has now acquired a new, increased level of independence. He can now, of his own initiative and based on the Divine spirit that lives within him, give instructions to Israel in the Almighty’s name and on His behalf.

This marks a significant advancement on Moses’ part, which is the very essence of the imminent transition, that will take place only several chapters later, in Deuteronomy, the fifth and final book of the Torah. The vast majority of that book is Moses’ own address to the Jewish nation, which he delivers extemporaneously and in his own words. And yet, it is included in the Torah word for word, because it is considered nothing less than Divine revelation and teaching.<sup>76</sup>

But getting back to the opening topic of this weekly portion, *Mattot* – it is highly significant that Moses speaks these words at his own initiative. And it should be noted in particular that this happens only very close the Land of Israel, the land of Jewish independence, as contrasted with the wilderness years, an era of dependence, where taking initiative was actually discouraged.

Now that Israel is encamped on the east bank of the Jordan, as described in portions *Mattot* and *Mas’ei*, we must in a very real sense consider their sojourn there as if they are already residing in the Land

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<sup>76</sup> Note that there is a more general problem here. Jewish tradition states unequivocally that the entire Torah was given from Heaven. And yet, the text of the Torah includes direct quotations from various people – even people whose views clearly did not reflect Torah values. So, for example, when Pharaoh is quoted verbatim in the Torah, does this mean that those words are of Divine origin?

The answer is, of course, that indeed it was Pharaoh who said those words, but the Almighty commanded that they be written in the Torah. The words themselves are Pharaoh’s, but God’s decision has put them in the Torah, written exactly as needed; thus, they constitute Divine revelation. And likewise – but on a different level, of course – Moses’ own words are included in the Torah by the will of the Almighty, which gives them the status of “words given from Heaven.”

of Israel. This is because the Transjordan too is Promised Land territory (if only annexed territory).

However, we shall soon see that the new sense of independence leads to conflict, when the tribes of Gad and Reuben, feeling that they are already in their own land, resolve to settle there permanently, and not in the Land of Israel proper that lies further west beyond the Jordan River.

### § 26.3. THE IMPORTANCE OF JEWISH SPEECH IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL

The first topic that the Torah deals with as Israel is about to enter their new land is the topic of vows. A vow is a spoken word that obligates a person to the Almighty. As the people approach the boundary of the Land of Israel, we learn that it is a place where words have great meaning.

The idea of a vow is that speech creates reality. And the essence of the Land of Israel is to proclaim the Divine word to the world, “For the Torah will come out of Zion, and the word of God from Jerusalem” (Isa. 2:3; Mic. 4:2).

When the Jewish people are in exile, in the Diaspora, the Divine word too, as it were, is in exile. Under those conditions, the importance of the words of any one individual, and also the meaning of the message that the Jewish nation as a whole brings to the world, are felt much less keenly.

Overall, Jewish words in exile are much less powerful. The ideas and concepts that they express are not very interesting to other peoples. But when the Jews are in possession of their land, the Land of Israel, the whole world is listening. The more successful the Jews are when living in their own state, the more attention they receive.

Moreover, the “word of God from Jerusalem” is not only the actual words spoken by the Jewish people. Their very life in the Land of Israel is the word that they speak to humanity. But this “word” must be uttered at the national level, which is why Moses’ statement of the

commandment here opens with an appeal to the heads of the Israelite tribes – the political leaders.

And since a vow is a word that creates reality, a person who undertakes a vow must approach it with an attitude of great responsibility. Thus, an elaboration of the laws concerning vows and oaths and their proper observance holds vital educational value for the Jewish people on the eve of their entry into their new land.

The general structure of the Torah's wording of this commandment relates directly to its pedagogical meaning, and is as follows:

- (i) First there is an appeal to the national leadership, because the “Jewish word” in the grandest and most comprehensive sense must be spoken only at the national level.
- (ii) Next, the Torah emphasizes the importance of fulfilling vows, and of the obligation that they impose.
- (iii) Only then can there be a discussion concerning the vows of “dependent” members of society, and of the mechanism that allows the vows of such persons to be annulled by more responsible members of the community. In parallel with this, the Oral Torah (which deals primarily with the private problems of individuals, and not those of the nation as a whole) establishes the rules for canceling vows at the individual level, for all members of society.

#### § 26.4. THE OBLIGATION TO FULFILL ONE'S VOWS (30:2-3)

בַּיַדְבָר מִשֶׁה אֶל־רֵאשֵׁי הַמִּטּוֹת לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר זֶה הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר  
צִוָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּיַד־יְדֵי יְדִדֹר לֵוי אֹזֶה־שָׁבַע שְׁבַע־הָאֶסֶר לְאֶסֶר עַל־נַפְשׁוֹ  
לֹא יַחַל דְּבָרוֹ כְּכֹל־הַיֵּצֵא מִפִּיו יַעֲשֶׂה:

- (2) **Moses spoke to the heads of the Israelite tribes, saying: This is what the Lord has commanded:**
- (3) **If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips.**

**(2) Moses spoke to the heads of the Israelite tribes, saying:**

Moses most typically addresses the entire nation together; thus the formulation here is unusual also in this way. It emphasizes the chain of command: Moses speaks to the heads of the tribes, who will then convey his words to the people. This shows us that in matters of vows, the heads of the tribes, and the leadership in general, play a special role, different from their role in all other commandments.

The Oral Torah, which deals with the halachic (technical-legal) perspective on Jewish teachings, interprets this feature in two aspects:

- (i) Since Judaism generally discourages the making of vows, Moses wished to avoid a discussion of the topic with the entire nation. Instead, he explained those laws to the heads of the tribes, who could then, when and where necessary, teach them to the people.
- (ii) The heads of the tribes – the leadership – have a special status and a unique function in the matter of annulling vows (as we shall soon explain).

But as already noted, from the perspective of “the word of God that (through the Jewish people) goes forth from Jerusalem,” Moses transmits this commandment to the heads of the tribes in order to emphasize the importance of the people of Israel as a national organism. That is why in those epochs when the Jewish state exists in the Land of Israel, the Jewish people are blessed with the ability to proclaim Divine Revelation to all of humanity.<sup>77</sup> Thus, in educational terms, it was essential to emphasize the national character of this commandment, and not only its private, individual aspects.

**(3) If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips:** A vow expresses a person’s wish to obligate himself to do something more than he would otherwise be obligated to do. A vow is often motivated by a feeling that by obligating

<sup>77</sup> In particular, this is precisely why the Tanakh had to be written in the Land of Israel.

oneself before the Almighty beyond the basic requirement, a person can more effectively advance himself along the path to righteousness.

Jewish tradition regards such promises as permissible, but better avoided. It is preferable for a person to undertake what he chooses without making any vows. However, the Torah also recognizes that there are difficult moments in life when a person senses his “lack of righteousness” more acutely, and he therefore seeks a means of “raising that level” immediately.

Because that approach, in principle, can indeed be conducive to advancement, the Torah allows a person to “make a vow to the Lord,” as this verse expresses it (for example, Jacob’s vow, see Gen. 28:20). But in such cases it is critically essential that even after the danger has passed, and life is gradually restored to its prior, normal framework, those promises and commitments will not fall by the wayside. This is precisely what the commandments concerning vows endeavor to achieve.

**Makes a vow to the Lord:** *Neder*, a “vow,” is an obligation that a person takes upon himself with respect to a particular object. For example, he obligates himself to transfer ownership of some item from himself to someone else.

**Or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself:** *Shevu’ah*, an “oath,” is a promise one makes respecting his own person, rather than any given object. For example, he prohibits himself from eating a particular kind of food.

This is more clearly expressed here by the Hebrew, which is translated more literally as “restricting himself with a prohibition” (rather than the more general term “imposing an obligation”).

**He must carry out all that has crossed his lips:** A tacit decision is not sufficient to create an obligation. It must be actually pronounced, because a commitment spoken aloud is much more definite than an intention that a person “expresses” only mentally to himself.

On the other hand, if a person makes a verbal commitment, but only by mistake – that is, he inadvertently says something other than what he actually meant to say – there is no vow, because only deliberate statements matter. These rules apply to vows, and likewise to any word that a person (or nation) wishes to tell the world.

### § 26.5. THE ANNULMENT OF VOWS

A little later the Torah speaks of the annulment of a woman's vows by her father or husband (that is, by a person who, in relation to her, is the head of the family). However, the Written Torah says nothing about annulling the vows of an "independent" head of the family (that is, a man, or a widow or divorcée). On the contrary, it stresses that a vow undertaken must be strictly observed. Thus, the Torah is saying that while it is possible for the vows of a dependent person to be annulled, for an independent person it is important to observe them strictly.

While this concept is important pedagogically, the Oral Torah also makes it possible to annul a vow if a person claims that he took it upon himself in the heat of the moment, as only the result of a thoughtless, emotional outburst. (In other words, he was not truly independent at that moment, but behaved, in a sense, like a dependent person – controlled by his emotions.)

In that case, the vow can be annulled by a "tribal head." But since there are no such persons in modern times, that annulment can be done by an "eminent sage" of the era, or by a *Beit Din*, a Jewish religious court. In fact, this is how vows are annulled today.

A *Beit Din* consists of three adult Jews, and for this application it is immaterial whether or not they are actually judges. They can be any three persons authorized to represent society. That is, society is the source of "empowered authority," and its representatives can therefore perform the role of "tribal heads."

There is an important difference, however, between the annulment of a vow by a father or husband, and the decree of a *Beit Din*, which "absolves" the vow. It does so by dismantling the vow retroactively, by allowing the person who made the vow to find some fundamental flaw in it, which renders the entire vow invalid *ab initio*, because it did not take into account all the relevant circumstances.

Thus, these two situations cannot be precisely compared. Annulling a vow is possible when it affects the interests of someone else, to whom the person who has undertaken the vow (a daughter or wife) is obligated. But the cancellation of vows by a *Beit Din* – the "absolution of vows" – is one of those situations where we feel we must meet a

person halfway, to allow him to free himself from something done rashly and impetuously. Although here, too, the underlying idea is lack of independence, the mechanism is nonetheless different.

### § 26.6. WOMEN'S VOWS (30:4-17)

ד וְאִשָּׁה כִּי־תִדְרַגְדֵּר לַיהוָה וְאָסְרָה אָסֶר בְּבֵית אָבִיהָ בְנַעֲרִיהָ: ה וְשָׁמַע אָבִיהָ אֶת־נִדְרָהּ וְאָסְרָה אֲשֶׁר אָסְרָה עַל־נַפְשָׁהּ וְהַחֲרִישׁ לָהּ אָבִיהָ וְקָמוּ כָל־נִדְרֶיהָ וְכָל־אָסֶר אֲשֶׁר־אָסְרָה עַל־נַפְשָׁהּ יָקוּם: ו וְאִם־הִנִּיא אָבִיהָ אֶתָּה בְּיוֹם שָׁמְעוֹ כָל־נִדְרֶיהָ וְאָסְרָהּ אֲשֶׁר־אָסְרָה עַל־נַפְשָׁהּ לֹא יָקוּם וְיִסְלַח־לָהּ כִּי־הִנִּיא אָבִיהָ אֶתָּה: ז וְאִם־הִיוּ תְהִיָּה לְאִישׁ וְנִדְרֶיהָ עָלֶיהָ אֹז מִבְּטָא שְׁפָתֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר אָסְרָה עַל־נַפְשָׁהּ: ח וְשָׁמַע אִישָׁה בְּיוֹם שָׁמְעוֹ וְהַחֲרִישׁ לָהּ וְקָמוּ נִדְרֶיהָ וְאָסְרָה אֲשֶׁר־אָסְרָה עַל־נַפְשָׁהּ יָקָמוּ: ט וְאִם בְּיוֹם שָׁמַע אִישָׁה יִנִּיא אוֹתָהּ וְהִפָּר אֶת־נִדְרָהּ אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ וְאֵת מִבְּטָא שְׁפָתֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר אָסְרָה עַל־נַפְשָׁהּ וְיִסְלַח־לָהּ: י וְנִדְרָהּ אֶלְמָנָה וְגֵרוּשָׁה כָּל אֲשֶׁר־אָסְרָה עַל־נַפְשָׁהּ יָקוּם עָלֶיהָ: יא וְאִם־בֵּית אִישָׁה נִדְרָהּ אוֹ־אָסְרָה אָסֶר עַל־נַפְשָׁהּ בְּשִׁבְעָהּ: יב וְשָׁמַע אִישָׁה וְהַחֲרִישׁ לָהּ לֹא הִנִּיא אֶתָּה וְקָמוּ כָל־נִדְרֶיהָ וְכָל־אָסֶר אֲשֶׁר־אָסְרָה עַל־נַפְשָׁהּ יָקוּם: יג וְאִם־הִפָּר יָפָר אֶתָּה | אִישָׁה בְּיוֹם שָׁמְעוֹ כָל־מוֹצֵא שְׁפָתֶיהָ לְנִדְרֶיהָ וְלֹא־אָסֶר נַפְשָׁהּ לֹא יָקוּם אִישָׁה הַפָּרִים וְיִסְלַח־לָהּ: יד כָּל־נִדְרָהּ וְכָל־שִׁבְעָת אָסֶר לְעֵזַת נַפְשָׁהּ אִישָׁה יָקִימוּ וְאִישָׁה יִפְרָנוּ: טו וְאִם־הַחֲרַשׁ יַחֲרִישׁ לָהּ אִישָׁה מִיוֹם אֶל־יוֹם וְהָקִים אֶת־כָּל־נִדְרֶיהָ אוֹ אֶת־כָּל־אָסְרֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ הָקִים אֶתָּה כִּי־הַחֲרַשׁ לָהּ בְּיוֹם שָׁמְעוֹ: טז וְאִם־הִפָּר יָפָר אֶתָּה אַחֲרֵי שָׁמְעוֹ וְנִשְׂא אֶת־עוֹנָהּ: יז אֵלֶּה הַחֲקִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְיָ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה בֵּין אִישׁ לְאִשְׁתּוֹ בֵּין־אָב לְבָתּוֹ בְנַעֲרִיהָ בֵּית אָבִיהָ:

(4) If a woman makes a vow to the Lord or assumes an obligation while still in her father's household by reason of her youth,

(5) and her father learns of her vow or her self-imposed obligation and offers no objection, all her vows shall stand and every self-imposed obligation shall stand.

(6) **But if her father restrains her on the day he finds out, none of her vows or self-imposed obligations shall stand; and the Lord will forgive her, since her father restrained her.**

(7) **If she should marry while her vow or the commitment to which she bound herself is still in force,**

(8) **and her husband learns of it and offers no objection on the day he finds out, her vows shall stand and her self-imposed obligations shall stand.**

(9) **But if her husband restrains her on the day that he learns of it, he thereby annuls her vow which was in force or the commitment to which she bound herself; and the Lord will forgive her.**

(10) **– The vow of a widow or of a divorced woman, however, whatever she has imposed on herself, shall be binding upon her. –**

(11) **So, too, if, while in her husband's household, she makes a vow or imposes an obligation on herself by oath,**

(12) **and her husband learns of it, yet offers no objection – thus failing to restrain her – all her vows shall stand and all her self-imposed obligations shall stand.**

(13) **But if her husband does annul them on the day he finds out, then nothing that has crossed her lips shall stand, whether vows or self-imposed obligations. Her husband has annulled them, and the Lord will forgive her.**

(14) **Every vow and every sworn obligation of self-denial may be upheld by her husband or annulled by her husband.**

(15) **If her husband offers no objection from that day to the next, he has upheld all the vows or obligations she has assumed: he has upheld them by offering no objection on the day he found out.**

(16) **But if he annuls them after [the day] he finds out, he shall bear her guilt.**

(17) **Those are the laws that the Lord enjoined upon Moses between a man and his wife, and as between a father and his daughter while in her father's household by reason of her youth.**

**(4) If a woman makes a vow to the Lord or assumes an obligation:** As already explained, the Written Torah provides for annulment of vows for “dependent” members of society. In this context, and in accordance with the mores of those times, this means, primarily, young girls and married women. And yet, even a more independent and responsible member of society – in this context, the father or husband – has only very limited rights for annulling his daughter’s or wife’s vows: he must annul the vow on the very same day that he first hears about it.

Thus, it is incorrect to interpret this right to annul as an expression of “male power” over women. Rather, a father or husband’s right to cancel improper or inadequate vows as soon as he becomes aware of them is apparently based on following assumptions:

- (i) Because, as a rule, honoring family boundaries is especially important to a woman, she initially (if only implicitly) conditions any vow on the consent of her father or husband.
- (ii) Some women are inclined to make improper or unreasonable vows – perhaps because they sense life’s limitations, even the more subtle ones, very keenly, which they try to address with the aid of vows. Clearly, then, there is a need for a relatively easy way to annul such vows.

From an halachic point of view, women, just like men, have the option of turning to a sage or court to cancel a vow. (These have much broader powers with respect to vows – in particular, they are not limited by the “same day” requirement.)

But here a woman is given yet another option, an opportunity to annul vows within the family, in order to avoid having to go out into the larger society to have her issue addressed. (In ancient times that was always considered a second-resort solution, to be avoided when and where possible.)

**While still in her father’s household by reason of her youth:** This qualification, “by reason of her youth,” is coming to tell us that her father’s prerogative to annul her vows applies only when she is not yet an adult (that is, she is less than twelve years old), and her vows are therefore considered less serious. Conversely, once a girl reaches legal adulthood, even if she lives in her father’s house, she is not beholden

to him with respect to her vows, and he is not authorized to annul them.

**(5) And her father learns of her vow or her self-imposed obligation and offers no objection, all her vows shall stand:** This verse is the source of the legal principle that “silence tacitly implies consent.”

**(7) If she should marry while her vow or the commitment to which she bound herself is still in force:** The Torah first addresses the situation where the woman has undertaken one or more vows prior to her marriage.

**(8-9) And her husband learns of it and offers no objection on the day he finds out ... But if her husband restrains her on the day that he learns of it:** Marriage creates a new family structure, and the woman now sees some issues differently. This provides an opportunity for her to have her previous vows annulled, on the grounds that those vows are inadequate and in appropriate for her new, changed situation.

**(10) – The vow of a widow or of a divorced woman, however, whatever she has imposed on herself, shall be binding upon her:** Because a widow or divorcée who runs her own household is considered an independent, fully responsible member of society, she does not have the option to have her vow annulled within the family structure. However, according to the Oral Torah, she can, just like a man, have her vows “absolved” in a *Beit Din*, a Jewish court.

**(11) So, too, if, while in her husband’s household, she makes a vow or imposes an obligation on herself by oath:** This is a second, different situation – a woman makes a vow after she is already married. Although the law in this case is similar to the previous one, the Torah mentions it separately, because psychologically people perceive “old vows” and “new vows” as fundamentally different.

**(13) But if her husband does annul them on the day he finds out, then nothing that has crossed her lips shall stand, whether vows or self-imposed obligations. Her husband has annulled them, and the Lord will forgive her:** “Forgiveness from Above” is specially emphasized here. Since the entire matter of vows, rather than being an exclusively legal matter, is intimately associated with a person’s psychological state, the Torah gives its assurance that when a vow is

annulled, there will be no lingering legacy of complications, whether legal or moral.

**(14) Every vow and every sworn obligation of self-denial may be upheld by her husband or annulled by her husband:** Self-denial is mentioned here to emphasize that the whole point of the annulment is to neutralize the effect of vows made precipitously, that would otherwise cause physical harm to the person who has undertaken them.

## § 27. THE WAR WITH MIDIAN

### § 27.1. THE COMMANDMENT TO WAGE WAR ON MIDIAN

(31:1-2)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב נָקֶם נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֵת הַמִּדְיָנִים  
אֲחֵר תִּאָסֵף אֶל־עַמֶּיךָ:

(1) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying,**

(2) **“Avenge the Israelite people on the Midianites; then you shall be gathered to your kin.”**

(1) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:** It was Moses who was charged with mounting the attack against the Midianites and seeing that the war was fully carried out.

(2) **Avenge:** The objective of this war was not territorial conquest or elimination of a military threat. Its purpose was revenge.

**Avenge the Israelite people on the Midianites:** The Almighty points out that Midian, not Moab, is the target of the revenge. Ideologically speaking, the attack on Israel (of seduction to immorality and idolatry) came from Midian, and it was therefore important that the revenge be directed toward the instigators.

**Avenge the Israelite people on the Midianites; then you shall be gathered to your kin:** The essential point here is that Moses’ life work cannot be considered complete until he wages war against the Midianites, which is important in two respects. First, a major component of Moses’ mission is to educate the wilderness generation for their new life in the Land of Israel, and this war is one element of

that. But secondly, as the Midrash explains, the war against Midian is a part of the process of correcting Moses himself.

Throughout the journey across the wilderness, the Israelites were isolated from other peoples, and their education focused on building their internal structure. As soon as they came into personal contact with a foreign culture, it became obvious that they still needed much work in learning to resist temptation to debauchery and idolatry. Therefore, still within the framework of that national education, this war with Midian was meant to serve as a correction for the people of Israel, by strengthening their ability to resist temptation.

But as for correcting Moses himself, the Midrash says: “Moses cannot finally become one with the Jewish people until he takes revenge on the Midianites.” In this verse, the straightforward meaning of “then you shall be gathered to your kin” is of course that it is a euphemism for death. But the Midrash understands it literally as, “then you shall be united with your nation.”

Moses is too closely associated with Midian through his ideological viewpoints and family ties. His sons are the grandchildren of Jethro, the former chief Midianite priest. Even Moses himself, at the beginning of his journey, maintained an erroneous attitude towards Midian. For a time he seriously considered creating God’s chosen people from Midian, not from Israel.<sup>78</sup> If he is to find complete inclusion and acceptance in the Jewish nation, Moses must finally make a clean break with Midian, and overcome his personal, sentimental attachments to it. Therefore, Moses (and not Joshua) must wage war against Midian.

For Moses and for the Jews of that generation, Midian is a temptation, just as Aram (Mesopotamia) was at the time of the Patriarchs. When Abraham left Aram, his brother Nahor remained there. Abraham left, because he understood that “Aramean-ness” represents assimilation into surrounding world culture, whereas the Jews were destined to be, and would always be, a distinct and special people.

And now, in Moses’ era, Midian presents a very similar temptation. Midian, moreover, in order to strengthen the line of universal monotheism to the exclusion of the Jewish line, invited into its midst

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<sup>78</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on the book of Exodus, § 1.

the Aramaean prophet Balaam, a descendant of Laban and Nahor. And because this temptation to “assimilate into universalism” will always persist among a certain element of the Jewish people even in subsequent generations, the revenge on Midian and Balaam’s execution are necessary as a defense against it.

Note that according to this midrash, the preservation of Abrahamic monotheism among the Midianites, and in Balaam too, did not prevent the Midianites from seducing Israel to idolatry and Peor worship, and they saw no contradiction in that. As noted above, their monotheism was not “exclusive,” as Jewish monotheism is. Although the Aramaeans themselves adhered to monotheism, they were not opposed to the practice of idolatry among the neighboring nations, and never sought to discourage such idolatrous practices.

#### § 27.2. THE VICTORY OVER MIDIAN (31:3-12)

ג וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם לֵאמֹר הִחַלְצוּ מֵאִתְּכֶם אַנְשִׁים לְצַבָּא וַיְהִי  
 עַל־מִדְיָן לְתֵת נִקְמַת־יְיָ בְּמִדְיָן: ד אֱלֹף לַמַּטֵּה אֱלֹף לַמַּטֵּה לְכָל מִטּוֹת  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּשְׁלְחוּ לְצַבָּא: ה וַיִּמְסְרוּ מֵאֲלֵפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֱלֹף לַמַּטֵּה שְׁנַיִם־  
 עָשָׂר אֱלֹף חֲלוּצֵי צַבָּא: ו וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה אֱלֹף לַמַּטֵּה לְצַבָּא  
 אֹתָם וְאֶת־פִּינְחָס בֶּן־אֱלֵעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן לְצַבָּא וְכָלִי הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְחֻצְצֹרֹת  
 הַתְּרוּעָה בְיָדוֹ: ז וַיִּצְבְּאוּ עַל־מִדְיָן כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְיָ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וַיַּהֲרֹגוּ  
 כָּל־זָכָר: ח וְאֶת־מַלְכֵי מִדְיָן הָרְגוּ עַל־חַלְלֵיהֶם אֶת־אֹנִי וְאֶת־לֶקֶם  
 וְאֶת־צֹר וְאֶת־חוּר וְאֶת־רְבֵעַ חַמְשַׁת מַלְכֵי מִדְיָן וְאֵת בַּלְעָם בֶּן־  
 בְּעֹזֵר הָרְגוּ בַחֶרֶב: ט וַיִּשְׁבּוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־נְשֵׁי מִדְיָן וְאֶת־טַפָּם וְאֵת  
 כָּל־בְּהֵמָתָם וְאֶת־כָּל־מִקְנֵיהֶם וְאֶת־כָּל־חֵילָם בְּזוּז: י וְאֵת כָּל־עֲרֵיהֶם  
 בְּמוֹשְׁבֹתָם וְאֵת כָּל־טִירָתָם שָׂרְפוּ בָאֵשׁ: יא וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת־כָּל־הַשְּׁלָל  
 וְאֵת כָּל־הַמִּלְקוֹחַ בָּאָדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה: יב וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אֱלֵעָזָר  
 הַכֹּהֵן וְאֶל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשְּׁבִי וְאֶת־הַמִּלְקוֹחַ וְאֶת־הַשְּׁלָל  
 אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה אֶל־עֲרֵבַת מוֹאָב אֲשֶׁר עַל־יַרְדֵּן יְרֵחוּ:

(3) Moses spoke to the people, saying, “Let men be picked out from among you for a campaign, and let them fall upon Midian to wreak the Lord’s vengeance on Midian.

**(4) You shall dispatch on the campaign a thousand from every one of the tribes of Israel.”**

**(5) So a thousand from each tribe were furnished from the divisions of Israel, twelve thousand picked for the campaign.**

**(6) Moses dispatched them on the campaign, a thousand from each tribe, with Phinehas son of Eleazar serving as a priest on the campaign, equipped with the sacred utensils and the trumpets for sounding the blasts.**

**(7) They took the field against Midian, as the Lord had commanded Moses, and slew every male.**

**(8) Along with their other victims, they slew the kings of Midian: Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. They also put Balaam son of Beor to the sword.**

**(9) The Israelites took the women and children of the Midianites captive, and seized as booty all their beasts, all their herds, and all their wealth.**

**(10) And they destroyed by fire all the towns in which they were settled, and their encampments.**

**(11) They gathered all the spoil and all the booty, man and beast,**

**(12) and they brought the captives, the booty, and the spoil to Moses, Eleazar the priest, and the whole Israelite community, at the camp in the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho.**

**(3) Moses spoke to the people, saying, Let men be picked out from among you for a campaign, and let them fall upon Midian to wreak the Lord’s vengeance on Midian:** God had said (Num. 31:2) that the purpose of this war is to “avenge the Israelite people,” because it will contribute to their correction. But when Moses addresses the people here, he changes the wording and calls the war “the Lord’s vengeance,” because the seduction of the Jewish nation has wrought a certain amount of damage on the Divine presence in the world.

**(4) You shall dispatch on the campaign a thousand from every one of the tribes of Israel:** Since the purpose of this war is to restore

morality and national identity, all the tribes must participate in it equally.

Although Midian was a large and powerful people (as can be seen later from the numbers of captives taken), Moses chose only twelve thousand people to fight them. Even taking into account that this was an “operational detachment” that was expected to execute a quick passage through the wilderness territory and attack the Midianites unawares, this number, only one fiftieth of Israel’s total available military forces of 600,000, seems too small.

According to Ramban (Nachmanides), the reason for this limited number of fighters is that only men who had not been involved in the sins of immorality and Peor worship, even indirectly, could be chosen for this mission, and there were very few such men.

**You shall dispatch on the campaign:** The Hebrew here for “campaign” is *tzava*, a common Hebrew word that means “army,” or, more generally, any organized group of persons. That word will appear again and again in this chapter (even as a verb in Num. 31:7, *va-yitzbe’u*, “they took the field,” but more literally, “they warred”). This is meant to emphasize that organization plays a critical role in this operation.

The episode of the seduction by the Midianite women and the worship of Peor involved sins of highly irresponsible behavior, in which individuals did not realize the larger consequences of their actions for the entire nation. The sin is ultimately corrected when the people come to see themselves as part of a larger system, where the actions of just one person can affect all the others. As members of this “army” these men had to learn in a critical situation to disregard their own passions and desires in order to achieve a common task.

**(6) Moses dispatched them on the campaign, a thousand from each tribe, with Phinehas son of Eleazar serving as a priest on the campaign, equipped with the sacred utensils and the trumpets for sounding the blasts:** Phinehas’ function here is twofold. On the one hand, he is a “military priest,” essential for waging war, but on the other hand, Phinehas’ participation in the operations of this “army” will also facilitate his own correction.

What is a military priest? The Torah requires that in any war fought with a religious objective, a deputy High Priest must accompany

the army into battle. His official title is *kohen meshuach milchamah* (Mishnah, Sotah 8:1), “the priest anointed for war,” as mentioned most explicitly at Deut. 20:1-4:

“When you take the field against your enemies, and see horses and chariots – forces larger than yours – have no fear of them, for the Lord your God, who brought you from the land of Egypt, is with you. Before you join battle, *the priest shall come forward and address the troops*. He shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel! You are about to join battle with your enemy. Let not your courage falter. Do not be in fear, or in panic, or in dread of them. For it is the Lord your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory.’”

This priest was not present in any of the military campaigns described earlier in this book of Numbers – the wars against Sihon, Og and the Amorites – because those wars were fought with purely material objectives. But conversely, the purpose of this war with Midian was to restore moral and spiritual values, signifying that it is categorically unacceptable for any nation to seduce the Jewish people to idolatry.

On special occasions in later Jewish history it was a practice in wartime to carry the Ark of the Covenant to the front (see, for example, 1 Sam. 4:3). The military priest was expected to lead the army into battle along with the Ark. In this case, Phinehas was chosen for this role because he had demonstrated jealous zeal in opposing the seduction by the Midianites.

On the other hand, among the multiple repetitions of the word *tzava*, “army,” the text emphasizes “with Phinehas son of Eleazar serving as a priest *on the campaign*.” The reason for this is that Phinehas too must now come to recognize himself as a part of the army. His assassination of Zimri was the spontaneous act of a zealot, but if Phinehas is to later become a High Priest and national leader, he must learn to act not only spontaneously as a lone wolf, so-called, but as part of the larger social system, the “army.” Phinehas can acquire this skill only through the actual experience of interacting with the system.

**(7) They took the field against Midian, as the Lord had commanded Moses, and slew every male:** We know from later

history that the Midianites, besides not being annihilated in this war, remained a rather large nation, and in a certain historical period even ruled over the Canaan region, and had dominion over the Jews (Jud. 6-8). Thus, we can understand the words “slew every male” as referring not to the Midianite people as a whole, but, apparently, only to that smaller group of Midianites that participated in seducing the Israelites.

**(8) They also put Balaam son of Beor to the sword:** The emphasis here is on “put to the sword” – that is, he did not accidentally fall victim to hostilities, but was executed as his punishment. A little later in this chapter (Num. 31:16) we learn from Moses’ comment that the entire plan to seduce the Israelite men was organized on Balaam’s suggestion and advice, although nothing about that had been mentioned previously.

According to the Midrash, Balaam, on his way home to Pethor in Aram from his failed mission to curse Israel, detoured through Midian in order to receive payment for that advice of seduction that he had rendered the Midianites. Moreover, we have also noted previously that in the entire Balaam episode it was no coincidence that the “non-exclusive monotheists” united against the Jewish people. And who were those antagonists? Midian, Abraham’s descendants from his second wife Keturah, and Balaam, a descendant of Laban and Nahor. Therefore, at the decisive moment of revenge, Israel kills both of them (Balaam, and the Midianites), thus eliminating both sources of temptation.

**(9) The Israelites took the women and children of the Midianites captive, and seized as booty all their beasts, all their herds, and all their wealth:** These were the accepted rules of war at that time.

**(10) And they destroyed by fire all the towns in which they were settled, and their encampments:** Such treatment of the enemy was considered quite normal in those days.

## § 27.3. THE PROBLEM OF THE CAPTIVES (31:13-18)

יג וַיֵּצְאוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וְכָל־גִּבּוֹרֵי הָעֵדָה לִקְרֹאתָם אֶל־  
 מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה: יד וַיִּקְצֹף מֹשֶׁה עַל פְּקוּדֵי הַחֵיל שָׂרֵי הָאֲלָפִים וְשָׂרֵי  
 הַמֵּאוֹת הַבָּאִים מִצִּבְאָה הַמְּלַחֶמָה: טו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם מֹשֶׁה הַחַיִּיתֶם  
 כָּל־נַקְבָּה: טז הֲנִן הִנֵּה הָיוּ לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּדָבָר בְּלֹעַם לְמַסְר־מַעַל בְּיָי  
 עַל־דַּבְר־פְּעֹזֹר וַתְּהִי הַמַּגֵּפָה בְּעַדְתַּי יי: יז וְעַתָּה הֲרִגוּ כָל־זָכָר בְּטוֹף  
 וְכָל־אִשָּׁה יוֹדַעַת אִישׁ לְמַשְׁכַּב זָכָר הֲרִגוּ: יח וְכָל־הַטּוֹף בְּנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר  
 לֹא־יָדְעוּ מִשְׁכַּב זָכָר הַחַיִּיו לָכֶם:

(13) **Moses, Eleazar the priest, and all the chieftains of the community came out to meet them outside the camp.**

(14) **Moses became angry with the commanders of the army, the officers of thousands and the officers of hundreds, who had come back from the military campaign.**

(15) **Moses said to them, "You have spared every female!**

(16) **Yet they are the very ones who, at the bidding of Balaam, induced the Israelites to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, so that the Lord's community was struck by the plague.**

(17) **Now, therefore, slay every male among the children, and slay also every woman who has known a man carnally;**

(18) **but spare every young woman who has not had carnal relations with a man.**

(14) **Moses became angry with the commanders of the army, the officers of thousands and the officers of hundreds, who had come back from the military campaign:** Instead of welcoming them back with praises for having successfully executed their mission, Moses is angry. On the face of it, we might think that this is because an important part of the revenge has not been completed. But that is only an external reason; internally, this anger is associated with Moses' own problems in relation to the war against Midian. We will have a closer look at this aspect below.

**(15) Moses said to them, “You have spared every female!”:** In Moses’ view, the military leaders should have understood on their own that the Midianite women were the main culprits in Israel’s seduction.

**(16) Yet they are the very ones who, at the bidding of Balaam, induced the Israelites to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor:** Moses speaks of Balaam’s “bidding” as a well-known fact. And yet, we were not made aware of that in Num. 31:8 where Balaam’s execution was reported, but only here, in connection with the issue of the captive women. In fact, this is the first time we learn about it at all.

Apparently, the fact that the seduction happened as the result of Balaam’s advice is not all that important in the larger picture. Action, not advice, is what is most important, and that means that the offenders cannot shift their blame onto their advisers.

We see in this passage a characteristic example of the “retrospection technique” that is quite common in the Torah’s narrative style. Events that were at first recounted in a somewhat cursory fashion are later retold in more detail. After the events are rethought and the details fleshed out, we are then told what really happened.

**(16) Induced the Israelites to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, so that the Lord’s community was struck by the plague:** To us in the modern era, seduction to idolatry might seem as nothing more than an “ideological conflict.” But the Torah makes very clear in many places that idolatry is one of those unpardonable offenses for which a perpetrator incurs the death penalty. Thus, in this situation, the seduction to idolatry threatened the very physical existence of the entire nation.

**(17) Now, therefore, slay every male among the children, and slay also every woman who has known a man carnally:** This is not an ordinary war, but revenge for a national provocation that threatened to destroy the Jewish people. Although the Torah prescribes fundamentally different laws for war (see Deut. 20), revenge against Midian was an exceptional case that required conforming to the ruthless norms of those times. Otherwise, the surrounding peoples, and even the Jewish people themselves, would not have appreciated the seriousness of the situation, and would not have reacted adequately and appropriately to what had happened.

**(17) And slay also every woman who has known a man carnally:** The reason for slaying these women was precisely that they had “known a man carnally,” that is, their involvement in the Midianite culture of seduction.

**(18) But spare every young woman who has not had carnal relations with a man:** The commentators believe that this meant, simply, differentiation by age. The girls who by age were not yet suitable for marriage did not yet carry within them the depravity of Midian, and were therefore spared.

**But spare every young woman ...:** Literally, “But keep alive for yourselves every young woman ... .” Some commentators suggest that “keep alive for yourselves” means to keep them as servants. But others explain “for yourselves” as meaning to keep them for marriage. In so, the idea is that after the evil has been eradicated, a positive core remains in Midian that can be integrated into the Jewish people. We will have more to say about this issue below.

#### § 27.4. WARTIME ATROCITIES IN THE TORAH

Two elements in the Torah are especially difficult to reconcile with our modern sense of morality. These are the commandment to annihilate the Canaanite peoples, and the incident of the Midianite captives.

When the soldiers return from the war against the Midianites, bringing with them the women and children who have been taken captive, Moses orders them to kill all the adult women, and all the males of any age, sparing only the young girls (as servants, or as future wives for the Israelite men).

By today’s standards, this is a monstrous atrocity that is categorically incompatible with fundamental principles of morality. It seems incomprehensible that the Torah, which teaches us morality and human compassion, can so blithely describe these events without any condemnation whatsoever.

When discussing this issue, it is important to note, first of all, that in antiquity (and even in much later eras) virtually all peoples

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practiced barbarism. Therefore, if we knew from historical chronicles alone that the Jews in antiquity, more than three thousand years ago, exterminated a certain people, we would not treat this as something out of the ordinary. Our main problem is that this manifestation of cruelty is recounted in the Torah, which is meant to be a model of morality and human compassion for all of mankind.

The answer is that not all of the Torah's instructions are meant to serve as timeless ideals. In certain cases they apply only to the given time and to the particular exigencies of the situation at hand. Therefore, when discussing any incident in the Torah, we first need to distinguish between those things that we understand as ideals and models to be emulated, and those that are appropriate only for a certain historical period or event.

The Canaanite and Midianite episodes are not meant as commandments for the future, or models of proper behavior. They represent historical events, each of which is relevant in the context of its time, but is by no means a prescription for the future. Thus, the incident here is not intended to exemplify ideals, nor to instruct us how to model our own actions (although that is what the Torah usually comes to teach us), but is only a matter of how we should assess events of the past. If we try to judge the events of antiquity by the yardstick of contemporary moral standards, inevitably we will come up short-handed.

As human morality is constantly improving, what is the norm for one era may seem monstrous to the next. For example, most of us are not much bothered today that animals are massacred to be consumed as food, but it is quite possible that only a couple of hundred years from now such behavior will seem intolerably cruel. And then people will ask about us and our contemporaries: "How could they have done that? Did they not understand that killing a cow or even a chicken is barbaric! And how could the Torah allow what is so absolutely immoral?!"

Vegetarianism is in fact the Jewish ideal. But it is an ideal that we cannot (and must not) attempt to realize prematurely – that is, until humanity achieves it in the course of their natural development.

Of course, the Torah is not just an historical account, but an eternal guide for all future generations. However, the guidance that the Torah provides does not imply that everything it contains is a model for immediate action or an ideal to be followed. Precisely because the Torah is assumed and accepted as guide for life, we sometimes forget that some of its instructions were meant not universally, but only for certain specific situations. Some parts of the Torah have been given to us not with the intent that we will pattern our behavior accordingly, but only to give us an understanding of something about the world. Only in that sense do such parts of the Torah qualify as “guidance.”

When we study the Torah, we must keep in mind that the Torah permits many things that are far from ideal. Some of those today seem obviously horrendous – slavery, for example. The Torah’s objective is not to describe the absolute ideal of human behavior, but often only to describe the progress of advancing toward that ideal. Accordingly, it proceeds from the realities of life such as they were in the given era. The Torah therefore permits slavery, even while it limits the practice, and actually disapproves of it.

Israel’s wars of antiquity must be understood in that light. As noted earlier, in that era the total destruction of an enemy in battle was a universal phenomenon that was considered then quite normal. Although the Torah, predominantly, prescribes different, more humane norms of behavior in war, in some situations, as in the case of the Canaanite and Midianite peoples, the accounts and commands of the Torah correspond to the norms of those times. And this is simply because the Jewish people could not possibly have survived had they not adjusted their behavior to the cruel standards (norms) of those eras.

We must realize that our Western world’s rejection of cruelty in modern times is actually due to the Torah, and based on norms of morality proclaimed by the Torah. But at the same time, for the Jewish people and the Torah to have survived in ancient times, when brutality was the norm, the Jewish people too had to behave cruelly in certain cases, for otherwise both the Jews and Judaism would have perished, and there would be no one left today to teach humanity that cruelty is unacceptable.

When people who oppose cruelty today accuse the Torah of being cruel or of sanctioning such behavior, they fail to consider that they are themselves the product of a cultural environment that spanned many generations and was shaped by the Torah's ideas.

### § 27.5. MOSES' ANGER

A perplexing question is why Moses becomes angry with the military commanders because of how they dealt with the Midianite captives. If they did not understand on their own that they had acted improperly, and that correction was necessary, Moses should have simply offered them an explanation that would have clarified their mistake. But why the anger?

In the main, Jewish tradition has a very negative attitude toward anger. As concerns Moses specifically, the Torah's position is that it was Moses' anger that caused him to disobey God in the incident of smiting the rock (Num. 20:11). And moreover, Moses' anger is deemed the reason that he forgot certain details of the law in several situations. A representative example is the incident of the goat of the sin offering that had been burnt rather than eaten (Lev. 10:16), and the same applies here. Thus, Moses' anger is a fairly clear indication of some personal problem in Moses himself.

As also previously noted, Moses had initially entertained an erroneous attitude toward Midian. He had even considered creating God's chosen people from Midian rather than from Israel, who, as it seemed to him, had irretrievably degraded during their Egyptian bondage. Moses learned a great deal from Midian during his decades-long stay there, and as evidence of his very close connection with this people we have the fact that he married the daughter of the Midianite high priest Jethro; his own sons are therefore half Midianite. But in fact, this is exactly why God commanded Moses, and no one else, to wage war against the Midianites. It was the only way that Moses could finally make a clean break from Midian, and be completely united with his own people, Israel.

Apparently, Moses' anger in response to the handling of the Midianite captives derives from the difficulty he is experiencing in dealing with the idea of waging war with Midian at all. And that tension manifests in the form of anger.

When a person becomes angry, instead of just calmly pointing out to the other person the latter's mistake, it is typically a sign that he is himself wrong about something, which he senses, and therefore unleashes his anger on others. In this case, apparently, it was difficult for Moses to give clear instructions in advance on how to deal with the Midianite captives. He had been hoping that there would be no captives – that those who resisted the Jewish army would be killed, and the rest would scatter.

We should note that one of the “wars of revenge” mentioned earlier in the Torah was the war with the king of Arad (Num. 21:1). There was no issue of prisoners or spoils of war in that case – the Israelites took nothing for themselves. It therefore seemed reasonable to Moses to assume that this time too it would be so. When he sent the army to war, he ordered “revenge,” but said nothing about the possibility of prisoners or spoils, or the expected treatment of those.

But as it turned out, the people approached that question quite differently, believing that revenge need not preclude acquisition – notwithstanding that Moses, at least initially, considered those two things mutually exclusive and entirely incompatible.

Moses came to realize that he had underestimated his attraction to Midian. He now understood that he should have given more precise directions from the start. Now he must issue troublesome orders in a situation that has quickly come to a head, which makes Moses very uncomfortable – and angry.

As noted above, Moses had selected only twelve thousand soldiers to conduct this military operation, the most “exemplary” Jewish men who had not been seduced by the Midianite women. But now it turns out that they, too, have brought back Midianite women from the war to become their wives. It is thus evident that these Jewish men too feel a strong attraction to the Midianite women. (Perhaps this was the very reason that the plan to seduce the Israelites proved so successful. We

will consider the possible spiritual reasons for this attraction a little later.)

It was unreasonable for Moses to expect that the men would now avoid temptation – even the twelve thousand soldiers who had not been seduced to debauchery and Peor worship. Taking prisoners of war seemed to them perfectly legal and proper, and they succumbed to that temptation.

Precisely because that attraction was a component of Moses' own psyche, he should have understood from the start that that attraction in the Jewish men was also very strong. But either he failed to realize that point, or he subconsciously suppressed it from his consciousness, which is why he failed to give the necessary orders when he sent the twelve thousand soldiers to war. It was that sense of his own mistake that was the source of Moses' anger.

In truth, the people are actually correct in feeling a need for some integration of Midian into Israel. By all indications Moses had underestimated that feeling; his confrontation with that need for integration may also be contributing to his anger. But without Moses' leadership, the people are incapable of properly assessing the boundaries of such integration.<sup>79</sup>

Consequently, Moses and the people reach a compromise – the acquisition is allowed, but on a smaller scale. They are allowed to spare some of the Midianite women (the youngest among them, who are not yet deeply influenced by Midianite culture), in order to marry them later. Thus, the desire for integration with Midian has been reduced, but to some extent legitimized. But Moses is forced to order killing those Midianite women and males who cannot (and therefore must not) be integrated into the Jewish community. It is very difficult

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<sup>79</sup> Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook notes that the correct relationship between the ordinary population and the Sages is built on the fact that the people have a good intuitive feel for the goings on, and of the way things develop generally, whereas the intuition of the Sages overall is significantly less developed in such matters. But at the same time, it is the Sages who must formulate concrete boundaries and laws, because the people cannot realize those without the Sages' expertise in those domains.

for Moses to give such an order, and this is yet one more reason for his anger.

As previously noted, the general idea that unites these final chapters of the book of Numbers is the clarification of the relationship between human initiative and Divine command – finding the proper balance between them. That clarification has now become all the more important as the Jewish nation stands on the very threshold of entering the Land of Israel.

This incident of Moses and the Midianite captives fits likewise into that general framework. A compromise is found between the soldiers' initiative of wanting to spare female captives and the Divine restriction on that initiative which, ultimately, is reduced to acceptable levels.

#### § 27.6. IS REVENGE PERMITTED BETWEEN NATIONS?

Israel did not take revenge on Midian because of a particular threat that they presented at that moment. Rather, the revenge was necessary because the continued survival of the Jewish people was in jeopardy, had Midian's actions gone unpunished.

The Torah very clearly condemns revenge in human relations: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen" (Lev. 19:18). We note the special emphasis of the words "against your countrymen." Nothing is said about revenge in the relations between nations.

The reason here is hardly, as some might think, that the Torah advocates that we treat our own people well while we behave badly to others who are outside our circle. No, nothing of the kind. Rather, the difference is that within the same nation a villain can be punished by a court of law, or negative behaviors thwarted by social pressures, whereas between nations the operative principle is that "might makes right." A nation that does not avenge the wrongs committed against it will be destroyed.

The morals of the Torah are not abstractions that guarantee an ideally bright future, but concrete guidelines for real life. The reality is that the accepted norms of human relations between individuals

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within the same political organism differ significantly from the norms adopted in relations between peoples and states.

The members of a given nation or state conform to certain norms of behavior not only because the law compels them to do so, but because relationships within a community are built on a sense of communal unity. In these relationships, the prohibition of taking revenge helps to correct individual behavior.

But relations between two different nations are an entirely different situation. In the sphere of international life, the reality is that if you are satisfied to be seen as a lamb, you must not be surprised when you become someone's dinner.

Of course, revenge is by far not ideal. When in the future all peoples will be united as one in their humanity, when in international life no nation will feel a desire to harm any other (or it will occur so rarely, at least, that the surrounding nations will contain such aspirations within safe boundaries), then revenge will be prohibited not only between individuals, but between nations as well.

But because that ideal vision is still such a long way off, whereas the Torah's approach to morality is intended to address today's realities, the Torah's attitude toward revenge in international relations is entirely different from its view on interpersonal revenge. That realistic viewpoint acknowledges that sometimes revenge is not merely acceptable, but even necessary.

For example, Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi destroyed the city of Shechem to avenge the rape of their sister Dinah, and their dispute with Jacob on this issue ends rather in their favor (Gen. 34:30-31). They took the action they did precisely because they already considered themselves, "the children of Israel," an independent and autonomous people – even if they were not really yet that in the full sense.

Likewise, taking revenge on Midian here was also completely necessary.

§ 27.7. CLEANSING THE SOLDIERS, THE CAPTIVES,  
AND THE BOOTY (31:19-20)

יִטְוּ אַתֶּם חָנּוּ מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כֹּל הַיָּג נֶפֶשׁ וְכֹל אֲנָע  
בְּחֹלֶל תִּתְחַטְּאוּ בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי אַתֶּם וּשְׁבִיבָם: כ וְכֹל-  
בְּגָד וְכֹל-בְּלִיעוֹר וְכֹל-מַעֲשֵׂה עֵזִים וְכֹל-בְּלִיעֵץ תִּתְחַטְּאוּ: 13)

(19) **“You shall then stay outside the camp seven days; every one among you or among your captives who has slain a person or touched a corpse shall cleanse himself on the third and seventh days.**

(20) **You shall also cleanse every cloth, every article of skin, everything made of goats’ hair, and every object of wood.”**

**(19) You shall then stay outside the camp seven days; every one among you or among your captives who has slain a person or touched a corpse shall cleanse himself on the third and seventh days:** This verse is a very brief summary of the laws for purifying persons and objects defiled by contact with the dead. That procedure requires being sprinkled with water mixed with the ashes of the Red Cow, as covered earlier in great detail at the beginning of weekly portion *Chukat* (see § 15).

**Shall cleanse himself:** Both the people and the spoils must be cleansed. In the formal, technical sense this refers to cleansing from defilement to the dead. But there is also a metaphorical meaning of cleansing from elements of a foreign, idolatrous culture that are now being integrated into the Jewish people. The fact that permission is granted to take captives and spoils of war demonstrates that under certain conditions the Jewish people may borrow some elements of alien cultures. But first those elements must be cleansed.

**(19) Every one among you or among your captives ... shall cleanse himself:** It is a general principle of the laws of ritual purity that only Jews are defiled by contact with a corpse, and only they require purification.

Cleansing from impurity is primarily associated with the Temple service; thus it is especially important for the priests to remain pure.

And since the Jewish people are the “priests of humanity” the laws of ritual purity apply to the entire Jewish nation. But the requirement to be cleansed from ritual impurity does not extend to non-Jews.

And yet, this verse says, “every one among you or among your captives ... shall cleanse himself on the third and seventh days,” which means that cleansing is a requirement here also for the captured Midianite girls. We can surmise that because the Israelite men will be allowed to marry them, those girls are already, in a certain sense, a part of the Jewish people, and the laws of purification therefore apply to them as well.

**(20) You shall also cleanse every cloth, every article of skin, everything made of goats’ hair, and every object of wood:** That is, the command stated by Moses is that objects made of wood, fabric, or materials of animal origin must be cleansed. But notice that Moses says nothing about metal objects. And so Eleazar will now have to fill in that gap, as we shall explain.

#### § 27.8. THE CLEANSING OF METAL OBJECTS (31:21-24)

כא וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן אֶל־אֲנָשֵׁי הַצָּבָא הַבָּאִים לַמִּלְחָמָה זֹאת חֻקַּת  
 הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יְיָ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה: כִּבְאֵד אֶת־הַזָּהָב וְאֶת־הַכֶּסֶף אֶת־  
 הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֶת־הַבְּרָזָל אֶת־הַבְּדִיל וְאֶת־הָעֹפְרַת: כִּג כָּל־דָּבָר אֲשֶׁר־יָבֵא  
 בָּאֵשׁ תַּעֲבִירוּ בָאֵשׁ וְטָהַר אֵד בְּמִי נֹדֵה יִתְחַטָּא וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָבֵא  
 בָּאֵשׁ תַּעֲבִירוּ בְּמַיִם: כֹּד וְכִבְסֹתֶם בְּגִדֵיכֶם בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׂבִיעִי וְטָהַרְתֶּם  
 וְאַחַר תָּבֹאוּ אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה:

(21) Eleazar the priest said to the troops who had taken part in the fighting, “This is the ritual law that the Lord has enjoined upon Moses:

(22) Gold and silver, copper, iron, tin, and lead

(23) – any article that can withstand fire – these you shall pass through fire and they shall be clean, except that they must be cleansed with water of lustration; and anything that cannot withstand fire you must pass through water.

**(24) On the seventh day you shall wash your clothes and be clean, and after that you may enter the camp.”**

**(21) Eleazar the priest said to the troops who had taken part in the fighting, “This is the ritual law that the Lord has enjoined upon Moses:** Suddenly we find Eleazar supplementing Moses’ words. Eleazar’s statement, “This is the ritual law that the Lord has enjoined upon Moses,” demonstrates that Moses had previously received this law of the purification of metal objects, and had passed it on to Eleazar. But Moses is incapable of expressing that law to the troops, and he needs Eleazar’s help. Why is this?

The Midrash believes that Moses yet again, because of his anger, “forgot the law” at that moment, and was unable to follow through on its exposition. The Midrash extends this also to other cases where, because Moses became angry, either he made mistakes or he could not fully convey Torah law. As indicated above, this is what happened in the incident of the sin offering of the Tabernacle dedication that had not been eaten (Lev. 10:16), and also when Moses smote the rock twice at the waters of Meribah (Num. 20:10).

Here, too, in the view of the Midrash, Moses’ anger is the reason that he is not able to convey the law of the purification of metal utensils. But the Midrash does not elaborate on the nature of the the relationship between Moses’ anger concerning the Midianite women and the purification of metals. We will try to explain that connection below.

**(22) Gold and silver, copper, iron, tin, and lead:** These are the six base metals that have been known to mankind since ancient times. The purification of all other materials of which Moses spoke above happens only through water, not with fire, whereas Eleazar’s addition here concerns the purification of metals, which is done with fire.

Moreover, the source of the “uncleanness” here is not contact with a corpse. Rather, the impurity of these metal objects derives from their having belonged to idolaters. And that is precisely the purification requirement (a fundamental precept of Jewish law) that the Halachah derives from this text.

**(23) Any article that can withstand fire – these you shall pass through fire and they shall be clean, except that they must be cleansed with water of lustration; and anything that cannot withstand fire you must pass through water:** Metal objects that “can withstand fire” most typically have been manufactured with that goal in mind; that is, their normal use is in fire. And they follow the general rule that the cleansing of a utensil corresponds to how it is normally used. Thus, such objects require additional cleansing through fire. Conversely, if their normal use does not involve fire, then no such purification is required. But regardless, they must be cleansed with water, in the same manner as non-metallic objects.

A utensil whose normal use is “through fire” is usually associated with food preparation (boiling or broiling). Thus, this passage is saying that objects used to prepare food must undergo additional purification. Halachically, Jewish tradition associates this additional purification with observance of the *kashrut* laws; that is, with the laws of keeping kosher. (*Kashrut* means “kosherness.”)

Such utensils retain food residue that is “embedded in their walls,” and under the influence of heat during normal use such absorption of food particles into the walls of the utensil only accelerates and increases. Utensils used by non-Jews for food preparation are therefore assumed to contain remnants of non-kosher food, and these must be “burnt out” in order to render those utensils kosher for Jewish use. This is the process of *kashering* metal utensils by subjecting them to extreme heat, as still practiced by traditional Jews today.

But at the level of the text’s straightforward meaning – that is, at the level of general principles and ideas – this text is not speaking of the laws of *kashrut* at all. Rather the “passing through the fire” of these utensils as required by this verse is a part of the process of cleansing those objects from ritual impurity (which is brought about, most typically and significantly, by contact with a corpse).

The apparent implication is that even conceptual “ritual impurity” penetrates into metal more forcefully and more deeply than it does in non-metallic things, and therefore requires a deeper, more thorough purification process, through fire. Although, practically speaking, objects that have not been “used in fire” are not required to be

“passed through the fire” in order to be purified (perhaps because such treatment will often destroy the object – if it is made from a so-called fusible alloy, for example), in general this rule applies to all metals utensils.

But since Moses did not communicate this law to the people, and it had to be communicated by Eleazar instead, we can infer that this law relates to the problem of Midian specifically, as previously expressed in Moses’ anger. But what is that connection?

Metal differs from other materials used in everyday life primarily in that it is used to make tools intended for further actions – implements such as vessels for cooking, or money (used as a medium of payment). In this respect metal objects differ from, say, wooden or woolen objects, which are intended for end use “as is.”

Perhaps it is this property that is inherent in metals – its role in producing other objects – that is the reason for the “deeper level of impurity” that their use by idolaters imparts to them, and the reason that they need to be purified by “passing through fire.” Note too that fire is the primary “instrument” of manufacture in human civilization, and, furthermore, that the production cycle of all metals includes smelting in fire.

The parallel here with Midian would thus seem to be that besides seducing the Israelite men themselves, the Midianite women also enlisted the help of the Moabite women for that purpose. Midian performed the function of a source – “a tool used to produce other end-use objects” – which is why it was impossible to treat them as a simple enemy, i.e.: “The victory is ours. All remnants of the enemy have fled, and the captives we have taken no longer pose any danger.” This was not at all the case with Midian. It was necessary to even to go so far as to execute some of the captives, which incurred Moses’ irritation and wrath.

In the end, it was painful for Moses to acknowledge that with a facilitator – a “tools manufacturer” – one must deal more harshly than with just an ordinary enemy. Although Moses was able to give the order, it engendered within him an internal tension that soon turned into anger, rendering him incapable of conveying to the people the law of purification of metal objects. (In the words of the Midrash, “the law

at that moment eluded him.”) Eleazar therefore had to supplement and complete that law, even as he made reference to Moses’ having received that law through Divine revelation.

**(24) On the seventh day you shall wash your clothes and be clean, and after that you may enter the camp”:** The washing of clothes completes the process of cleansing the people themselves, and also the purification of all their property.

#### § 27.9. INSTRUCTIONS ON HOW TO DIVIDE THE BOOTY (31:25-30)

כה וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: כֹּו שָׂא אֶת רֹאשׁ מִלְקוֹחַ הַשְּׂבִי בְּאֶדָם  
וּבַבְּהֵמָה אִתָּה וְאֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וְרֹאשֵׁי אָבוֹת הָעֵדָה: כֹּו וְחֻצִית אֶת־  
הַמִּלְקוֹחַ בֵּין תְּפִשֵׁי הַמִּלְחָמָה הַיְצָאִים לְצַבָּא וּבֵין כָּל־הָעֵדָה: כה וְהַרְמֹת  
מִכֶּס לִי מֵאֵת אַנְשֵׁי הַמִּלְחָמָה הַיְצָאִים לְצַבָּא אֶחָד זָפֶשׁ מִחֶמֶשׁ  
הַמֵּאוֹת מִן־הָאָדָם וּמִן־הַבְּקָר וּמִן־הַחֲמֹרִים וּמִן־הַצֹּאן: כט מִמִּחְצִיתָם  
תִּקְחוּ וְנָתַתָּה לְאֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן תְּרוּמַת יְיָ: לוּמִמְחֻצַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּקַּח |  
אֶחָד | אֶחָז מִן־הַחֲמִשִּׁים מִן־הָאָדָם מִן־הַבְּקָר מִן־הַחֲמֹרִים וּמִן־הַצֹּאן  
מִכָּל־הַבְּהֵמָה וְנָתַתָּה אֹתָם לְלוֹיִם שְׂמִרֵי מִשְׁמֶרֶת מִשְׁכַּן יְיָ:

(25) **The Lord said to Moses:**

(26) **“You and Eleazar the priest and the family heads of the community take an inventory of the booty that was captured, man and beast,**

(27) **and divide the booty equally between the combatants who engaged in the campaign and the rest of the community.**

(28) **You shall exact a levy for the Lord: in the case of the warriors who engaged in the campaign, one item in five hundred, of persons, oxen, asses, and sheep,**

(29) **shall be taken from their half-share and given to Eleazar the priest as a contribution to the Lord;**

(30) **and from the half-share of the other Israelites you shall withhold one in every fifty human beings as well as cattle,**

**asses, and sheep – all the animals – and give them to the Levites, who attend to the duties of the Lord’s Tabernacle.”**

**(26) You and Eleazar the priest and the family heads of the community take an inventory of the booty that was captured, man and beast:** Only the human captives and the livestock were subject to this inventory and division, but not the inanimate spoils – jewelry and ornaments, in particular. These the soldiers kept for themselves. The commanders of the troop divisions will later dedicate the gold jewelry to the Tabernacle (Num. 31:48 ff.).

**(27) And divide the booty:** In some wars (for example, the war with the king of Arad, and the capture of Jericho) taking booty was strictly prohibited. In this case, however, although it was a war of revenge, taking spoils was permitted, because there was a need to integrate some of the values of the Midianite culture into Israel, albeit only after certain purification procedures had been followed.

**And divide the booty equally between the combatants who engaged in the campaign and the rest of the community:** The distribution of the booty is recounted in this section in great detail. The fact that the Torah treats it at such length tells us that it is important not only for its historical interest, but as a lesson for all time.

However, the coverage that follows here is not applicable to the future in any sense of specific laws, or even as a general model for the division of booty, notwithstanding that similar divisions did take place on occasion in later Jewish history – in King David’s wars, for example (1 Sam. 30:24). Thus, from the point of view of the Torah’s teachings, we must see here some other meaning other than a legislative one.

In this regard, we understand that both segments of the population, those who fought and those who remained at home, had a need to integrate Midianite elements into themselves. But since only one fiftieth of the entire available army (twelve thousand out of six hundred thousand) was sent to war, and yet the fighters receive half of the booty, their share of the booty was thus fifty times greater than the share of those who remained in the camp. Since, as noted earlier, the soldiers who went to fight the Midianites were those who

had demonstrated the greatest resistance to the Midianite seduction, they were able to “digest” a much larger dose of Midianite values than those who had remained in the camp.

**(28-30) In the case of the warriors who engaged in the campaign, one item in five hundred ... and given to Eleazar the priest as a contribution to the Lord; and from the half-share of the other Israelites you shall withhold one in every fifty human ... and give them to the Levites, who attend to the duties of the Lord’s Tabernacle:** We can compare the division of the booty with other situations of value received. The most obvious example is the harvest, of which some part must be separated and given to the Temple. This is essential for self-awareness within society.

However, in contrast to the harvest, in which all persons contribute to the Temple equally, here the size of the offering is variable. The men who fought in the war, who are more resistant to Midianite values, contribute only one five hundredth, and they give it to a *kohen*, a priest, which corresponds to the standard quantity of *terumah*, the heave-offering that must be separated from the harvest and given to a *kohen*. Note that, here, too, the offering from the booty is called *terumat Hashem*, “a heave-offering to the Lord” (Num. 31:41, literal translation).

But the less resistant, who remained in the camp, must give a more substantial contribution, in the amount of one fiftieth, in order to be cleansed of Midianite influence. And they give it not to the *kohanim*, the priests, but to the Levites, who occupy a lower stratum in the hierarchy. In this sense, that offering corresponds to *ma’aser*, the tithe from the harvest that is given to the Levites.

#### § 27.10. DIVIDING THE BOOTY (31:31-54)

לא ויעש משה ואֵלֶעזֶר הַכֹּהֵן כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְיָ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה: לְבִנְיָהִי  
הַמְּלֻקוֹחַ יִתֵּר הַזֶּזוּ אֲשֶׁר בְּזִזוּ עִם הַצֹּבָא צֵאן שְׁש־מֵאוֹת אֵלָי וְשִׁבְעִים  
אֵלָי וְחֲמִשָּׁת אֲלָפִים: לֵג וּבִקֵּר שָׁנַיִם וְשִׁבְעִים אֵלָי: לְדוֹחַמְרַיִם אֶחָד  
וְשִׁשִּׁים אֵלָי: לֵה וְנִפְשׁ אֲדָם מִן־הַנָּשִׁים אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדְעוּ מִשִּׁבְבַּ זָכָר  
כָּל־נֶפֶשׁ שָׁנַיִם וְשִׁלְשִׁים אֵלָי: לְדוֹתְהִי הַמְּחֻצָּה חֶלֶק הַיִּצְאָיִם בְּצֹבָא

מספר הצאן שלש-מאות אֶלֶף וּשְׁלֹשִׁים אֶלֶף וּשְׁבַעַת אֲלָפִים וַחֲמֵשׁ מאות: לוֹ וַיְהִי הַמֶּכֶס לְיִי מִן־הַצֹּאן שֵׁשׁ מאות חֲמֵשׁ וּשְׁבַעִים: לח וְהַבְּקָר שֵׁשָׁה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים אֶלֶף וּמֵכֶסֶס לְיִי שְׁנַיִם וּשְׁבַעִים: לט וַחֲמֹרִים שְׁלֹשִׁים אֶלֶף וַחֲמֵשׁ מאות וּמֵכֶסֶס לְיִי אֶחָד וּשְׁשִׁים: מ וַנִּפְשׂ אָדָם שֵׁשָׁה עֶשֶׂר אֶלֶף וּמֵכֶסֶס לְיִי שְׁנַיִם וּשְׁלֹשִׁים גִּפְשׁ: מא וַיִּתֵּן מֹשֶׁה אֶת־מִשֶׁה אֶת־מַחְצִית תְּרוּמַת יִי לְאֵלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יִי אֶת־מֹשֶׁה: מב וּמִמַּחְצִית בְּגֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר חָצַה חֲצֵה מִשֶׁה מִן־הָאֲנָשִׁים הַעֲבָאִים: מג וַתְּהִי מַחְצֵת הָעֵדָה מִן־הַצֹּאן שְׁלֹשׁ־מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף וּשְׁלֹשִׁים אֶלֶף שְׁבַעַת אֲלָפִים וַחֲמֵשׁ מאות: מד וּבְקָר שֵׁשָׁה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים אֶלֶף: מה וַחֲמֹרִים שְׁלֹשִׁים אֶלֶף וַחֲמֵשׁ מאות: מו וַנִּפְשׂ אָדָם שֵׁשָׁה עֶשֶׂר אֶלֶף: מז וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה מִמַּחְצֵת בְּגֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הָאֶחָז וְאֶת־הַחֲמִשִּׁים מִן־הָאָדָם וּמִן־הַבְּהֵמָה וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם לְלוֹזִים שְׁמַרְי מִשְׁמֶרֶת מִשְׁכַּן יִי כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יִי אֶת־מֹשֶׁה: מח וַיִּקְרְבוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הַפְּקֹדִים אֲשֶׁר לְאֵלֹפִי הַעֲבָא שְׂרֵי הָאֲלָפִים וּשְׂרֵי הַמֵּאוֹת: מט וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עֲבַדְיָךְ נִשְׂאוּ אֶת־רֵאשׁ אֲנָשֵׁי הַמִּלְחָמָה אֲשֶׁר בִּידְנֹנוּ וְלֹא־נִפְקַד מִמֶּנּוּ אִישׁ: נ וַנִּקְרָב אֶת־קֶרְבָּן יִי אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר מֵצֵא כְּלִי־זָהָב אֲצַעֲדָה וְצִמִּיד טַבַּעַת עֲגִיל וְכוּמָז לְכַפֵּר עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵינוּ לִפְנֵי יִי: נא וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה וְאֵלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַזָּהָב מֵאֹתָם כֹּל כְּלֵי מַעֲשֵׂה: נב וַיְהִי | כֹּל־זָהָב הַתְּרוּמָה אֲשֶׁר הָרִימוּ לְיִי שֵׁשָׁה עֶשֶׂר אֶלֶף שְׁבַע־מֵאוֹת וַחֲמִשִּׁים שֶׁקֶל מֵאֵת שְׂרֵי הָאֲלָפִים וּמֵאֵת שְׂרֵי הַמֵּאוֹת: נג אֲנָשֵׁי הַעֲבָא בָּזְזוּ אִישׁ לוֹ: נד וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה וְאֵלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַזָּהָב מֵאֵת שְׂרֵי הָאֲלָפִים וְהַמֵּאוֹת וַיָּבֵאוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל־אַהֲלָה מוֹעֵד זָכְרוֹן לְבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵי יִי:

(31) Moses and Eleazar the priest did as the Lord commanded Moses.

(32) The amount of booty, other than the spoil that the troops had plundered, came to 675,000 sheep,

(33) 72,000 head of cattle,

(34) 61,000 asses,

(35) and a total of 32,000 human beings, namely, the women who had not had carnal relations.

(36) Thus, the half-share of those who had engaged in the campaign [was as follows]: The number of sheep was 337,500,

(37) and the Lord's levy from the sheep was 675;

(38) the cattle came to 36,000, from which the Lord's levy was 72;

(39) the asses came to 30,500, from which the Lord's levy was 61.

(40) And the number of human beings was 16,000, from which the Lord's levy was 32.

(41) Moses gave the contributions levied for the Lord to Eleazar the priest, as the Lord had commanded Moses.

(42) As for the half-share of the other Israelites, which Moses withdrew from the men who had taken the field,

(43) that half-share of the community consisted of 337,500 sheep,

(44) 36,000 head of cattle,

(45) 30,500 asses,

(46) and 16,000 human beings.

(47) From this half-share of the Israelites, Moses withheld one in every fifty humans and animals; and he gave them to the Levites, who attended to the duties of the Lord's Tabernacle, as the Lord had commanded Moses.

(48) The commanders of the troop divisions, the officers of thousands and the officers of hundreds, approached Moses.

(49) They said to Moses, "Your servants have made a check of the warriors in our charge, and not one of us is missing.

(50) So we have brought as an offering to the Lord such articles of gold as each of us came upon: armlets, bracelets, signet rings, earrings, and pendants, that expiation may be made for our persons before the Lord."

(51) Moses and Eleazar the priest accepted the gold from them, all kinds of wrought articles.

**(52) All the gold that was offered by the officers of thousands and the officers of hundreds as a contribution to the Lord came to 16,750 shekels.**

**(53) – But in the ranks, everyone kept his booty for himself. –**

**(54) So Moses and Eleazar the priest accepted the gold from the officers of thousands and the officers of hundreds and brought it to the Tent of Meeting, as a reminder in behalf of the Israelites before the Lord.**

**(32) The amount of booty, other than the spoil that the troops had plundered:** The tribute was taken only from the human captives and the livestock; that is, from the most important elements of the booty. But as concerned all the rest of the booty, each soldier could take for himself such items as he saw fit.

**(40-41) And the number of human beings was 16,000, from which the Lord's levy was 32 ... Moses gave the contributions levied for the Lord to Eleazar the priest:** "The contributions levied for the Lord" go to the disposal of the priests. That is, these women became servants in the homes of the priests.

**(48-50) The commanders of the troop divisions ... approached Moses. They said to Moses, "... not one of us is missing. So we have brought as an offering to the Lord such articles of gold":** They brought to the Temple all the gold that they had taken from Midian. (Only the human captives and the livestock were subject to formal division.)

**(50) That expiation may be made for our persons before the Lord:** The straightforward, simple meaning of these offerings is that they are a show of gratitude for the victory over Midian and for the safe return of the army. But an aspect of "expiation for our persons" – literally, "atonement for our souls" – is also added here.

The Midrash understands this atonement as forgiveness for improper thoughts. Although these righteous men were selected for the campaign because they had not sinned with the daughters of Midian, in their thoughts and in their hearts they had wanted to do so. And therefore they too need atonement, which the commanders wished to achieve through the offering of gold ornaments. Jewelry is

one of those things that are not essential to life; one can live quite well without it. Thus, jewelry corresponds to the *tosefet neshamah* in a human being, the “supplemental soul” that is the source of all thoughts, including sinful thoughts.

It is also quite possible that when the soldiers brought the female Midianite captives back with them from the front to the Israelite camp, they were succumbing to those thoughts. But Moses’ anger made clear to them their wrongdoing, and motivated them to seek correction.

**(52) All the gold that was offered by the officers of thousands and the officers of hundreds as a contribution to the Lord came to 16,750 shekels:** In today’s terms, that would be approximately 380 kilograms (838 pounds) of gold. We can see that the amount of gold jewelry among the spoils of this war was quite significant.

**(53) But in the ranks, everyone kept his booty for himself:** That is, they did not present their personal booty to the Tabernacle, nor to the common pool to be divided by percentage. Rather, each soldier kept for himself what he had taken. In spiritual terms, this means that a person must acquire “booty” by his own efforts. He cannot expect to receive it as a gift from anyone else.

**(54) So Moses and Eleazar the priest accepted the gold from the officers of thousands and the officers of hundreds and brought it to the Tent of Meeting, as a reminder in behalf of the Israelites before the Lord:** These ornaments were placed in the Tabernacle treasury. Once again, on a spiritual level, this means that the attainments of spiritual leaders, in addition to becoming a common heritage for all, also marks a new stage in the people’s development and thus constitutes “a reminder in behalf of the Israelites before the Lord.”

## § 28. THE TRIBES OF GAD AND REUBEN SETTLE IN THE TRANSJORDAN

### § 28.1. THE GADITES' AND THE REUBENITES' REQUEST CONCERNING THE TRANSJORDAN (32:1-5)

א ומקנה | רב ה'ה לבני ראובן ולבני־גד עצום מאד ויראו את־אֶרֶץ יַעֲזֵר וְאֶת־אֶרֶץ גִּלְעָד וְהָנָה הַמְּקוֹם מְקוֹם מִקְנֵה: ב וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־גַד וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וְאֶל־נְשֵׂי־הָעֵדָה לֵאמֹר: ג עֲטָרוֹת וְדִיבֹן וַיַּעֲזֵר וְנִמְרָה וְחֶשְׁבּוֹן וְאֶלְעָלָה וּשְׁבָם וְנֵבּוֹ וּבְעֹז: ד הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הִכָּה יְיָ לְפָנֶי עַדְתִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶרֶץ מִקְנֵה הוּא וְלַעֲבָדֶיךָ מִקְנֵה:

(1) **The Reubenites and the Gadites owned cattle in very great numbers. Noting that the lands of Jazer and Gilead were a region suitable for cattle,**

(2) **the Gadites and the Reubenites came to Moses, Eleazar the priest, and the chieftains of the community, and said,**

(3) **“Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo, and Beon –**

(4) **the land that the Lord has conquered for the community of Israel is cattle country, and your servants have cattle.**

(5) **It would be a favor to us,” they continued, “if this land were given to your servants as a holding; do not move us across the Jordan.”**

**(1) The Reubenites and the Gadites owned cattle:** These two tribes had developed an affinity, because their encampment and marching positions in the wilderness were adjacent – both tribes in the southern camp of Israel’s four camps (Num. 2:10,14; 10:18, 20).

As noted earlier, the southern camp from the start was the “problematic camp,” composed of the descendants of the oldest three of Jacob’s twelve sons, who had been excluded from the national leadership in favor of Judah. The third tribe of that camp, Simeon, lost its status and later its independence, eventually merging with the tribe of Judah. Reuben and Gad resolved to distance themselves from the rest of the tribes and settle in the Transjordan region, and this is the topic of the chapter that begins here.

**(1-2) The Reubenites and the Gadites owned cattle in very great numbers ... The Gadites and the Reubenites came ... and said:** As this episode is introduced, the Reubenites are mentioned first, because of Reuben’s seniority – in Jacob’s family and also in the southern camp. But when describing their demands, the Torah mentions the Gadites first, because they were the more aggressive of the two tribes.

According to the book of Genesis, Reuben, Jacob’s oldest son, was what we would call today a *schlimazel* (the Yiddish word for an inept, hapless individual<sup>80</sup>). This quality, apparently, was passed on also to his tribe, and that is why Gad, not Reuben, played the leading role when the the two tribes collaborated in this endeavor.

**Noting that the lands of Jazer and Gilead were a region suitable for cattle:** Gilead is a strip of land to the east of central Jordan, between the Jabbok and Yarmouk rivers. Just a little later Moses will recall: “And to the Reubenites and the Gadites I assigned the part from Gilead down to the wadi Arnon, the middle of the wadi being the boundary, and up to the wadi Jabbok, the boundary of the Ammonites” (Deut. 3:16).

But in the broader sense, Gilead sometimes refers to the entire area east of the Jordan. The east-west width of Gilead ranges from 40

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<sup>80</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on Gen. 35:22.

to 200 kilometers (25 to 124 miles). And from north to south – from the Sea of Cinnereth (Num. 34:11, today known as the Sea of Galilee) to the Dead Sea – 240 kilometers (149 miles). This is a vast territory. Jazer is located further east, beyond Gilead.

**(2-3) The Gadites and the Reubenites came to Moses, Eleazar the priest, and the chieftains of the community, and said: Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo, and Beon:** They are requesting that the lands of Sihon and Og, which they had previously conquered (Num. 21:21 ff., 33 ff.), be given to them as a permanent possession. The long list of cities in this verse underscores the vastness of these lands.

**(4) The land that the Lord has conquered for the community of Israel:** The two tribes emphasize that the conquest of the eastern bank of the Jordan has happened by the will of the Almighty.

**The land ... is cattle country, and your servants have cattle:** They are saying: “Since God has made it possible for the people of Israel to conquer a land that is so ideal for breeding livestock, surely we cannot attribute that to mere happenstance, nor can we believe that the Almighty wants us to just move on and abandon this territory. This region is meant to be more than just a waypoint on the journey to Canaan. Rather, it should become nothing less than a part of the Land of Israel.”

**(5) It would be a favor to us,” they continued, “if this land were given to your servants as a holding; do not move us across the Jordan”:** This is their baseline position: “We want to stay here – not to proceed any further, nor to go anywhere else.”

## § 28.2. THE TRANSJORDAN AS A PLACE FOR ISRAEL TO INTERACT WITH THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD

As we shall discuss in greater detail below, the Land of Israel consists of two different “layers.” Its interior is Canaan (or, more precisely, what was formerly the land of Canaan), which stretches from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. This is the land of the seven nations (Deut. 7:1), whose boundaries will be described in the

next weekly portion 10, *Mas'ei* (Num. 34:1-15). But the larger Land of Israel is the land of the ten nations, which extends from the Nile to the Euphrates, as stated in the covenant that God made with Abraham – “The Covenant between the Severed Pieces” (Gen. 15:18-21) – and includes the Jordan region as well.

Thus, the Jordan River flows from north to south at the center of the Land of Israel. All the land extending eastward from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River is the western half of the Land of Israel, and everything beyond the Jordan is its eastern half.

When the Jewish nation occupies only the western half of their land, the geographical center of the country is Shechem, but when they occupy the entire Land of Israel, Jericho becomes its geographical center.

The Land of Israel's Canaan section is the place of “inner holiness,” the place of the Temple. And the Transjordan region is the outer belt of the Land of Israel, the place where the Jewish people connects with the other nations of the world. (In this connection, it is interesting to note that in modern-day Israel, the presence of the Golan Heights, which is essentially a territory of the Transjordan, can be very significant spiritually.)

It is therefore no coincidence that the initial letters of the names of Gad and Reuben, the tribes who live in the Transjordan, spell the word *ger*, “stranger, newcomer” – that is, a person who has migrated “from the other side,” and thus represents the connection of the Jewish people with the nations of the world. Nor is there anything inherently negative in the economic basis of the Gadites' and Reubenites' request (i.e., the fact that they have much cattle), since a shared economy is one of the main channels of communication between peoples. When the nations of the world notice that the Jewish people have a flourishing economy, those nations strive to establish a connection with the Jews, and to understand Jewish culture.

Thus, the question here is not *whether* the Transjordan should belong to the Jewish people, for it surely will be. The issue is different – that the Land of Israel must not start with the Transjordan, to become the first of Israel's possessions, but must become a territory of expansion only after the conquest of Canaan.

This is because the internal sanctity of the Land of Israel is the first priority, with external expansion only secondary. When the Gadites and the Reubenites ask to receive their allotment in the Transjordan region before the conquest of Canaan, and they even add, “do not move us across the Jordan,” their request contradicts the correct order of things.

The final outcome of this episode is, that after being harshly criticized by Moses, the Gadites and the Reubenites ultimately do receive the Transjordan, but conditionally, as a possession postponed for the future, after the conquest of Canaan, in which the Gadites and the Reubenites will serve as the vanguard of the military. Thus, their rule over the Jordan will be only an extension of Jewish rule over Canaan. With this approach, the Gadites’ and Reubenites’ initial improper desire is not suppressed, but merely corrected.

### § 28.3. MOSES ADDRESSES THE TRIBES OF GAD AND REUBEN (32:6-15)

הַיּוֹאמְרוֹ אִם־מִצְאֵנוּ חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ יִתֵּן אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְעַבְדֶּיךָ  
 לְאַחֲזָהּ אֶל־תַּעֲבֲרֵנוּ אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְבְנֵי־גָד וּלְבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן  
 הֲאֶחֱיִיכֶם יִבְאוּ לְמַלְחָמָה וְאַתֶּם תֵּשְׁבוּ פֹה: וְלָמָּה תִּנוּאוּן (תִּנְיָאוּן)  
 אֶת־לֵב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעַבֵּל אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן לָהֶם יי: הֲכֹה עָשׂוּ  
 אֲבֹתֵיכֶם בְּשִׁלְחֵי אֲתָם מִקְדֹּשׁ בְּרִנֵּעַ לְרֵאוֹת אֶת־הָאָרֶץ: טו וַיַּעֲלוּ  
 עַד־נַחַל אֲשַׁפּוֹל וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת־לֵב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַלְתִּי־  
 בֹּא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן לָהֶם יי: וַיַּחֲרֹאֲף יי בְּיָוֵם הַהוּא וַיִּשְׁבַּע  
 לֵאמֹר: יא אִם־יִרְאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הָעֹלִים מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבְּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה  
 וּמֵעֵלָה אֶת הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב כִּי לֹא־  
 מְלֹאוּ אַחֲרָי: יב בְּלִתִּי כָּלֵב בֶּן־יִפְתָּח הַקַּנְזִי וַיהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נֹון כִּי מְלֹאוּ  
 אַחֲרָי יי: וַיַּחֲרֹאֲף יי בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּנְעַם בַּמִּדְבָּר אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה עַד־תֵּם  
 כָּל־הַדֹּר הַעֹשֶׂה הָרַע בְּעֵינֵי יי: יד וְהִנֵּה קִמְתֶּם תַּחַת אֲבֹתֵיכֶם תִּרְבּוּת  
 אֲנָשִׁים חֲטָאִים לְסַפּוֹת עוֹד עַל חֲרוֹן אַף־יִי אֶל־יִשְׂרָאֵל: טז כִּי תִשׁוּבוּן  
 מֵאַחֲרָיו וַיִּסַּף עוֹד לְהַנִּיחוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר וְשַׁחַתְתֶּם לְכָל־הָעָם הַזֶּה:

(6) **Moses replied to the Gadites and the Reubenites, “Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here?**

(7) **Why will you turn the minds of the Israelites from crossing into the land that the Lord has given them?**

(8) **That is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to survey the land.**

(9) **After going up to the wadi Eshcol and surveying the land, they turned the minds of the Israelites from invading the land that the Lord had given them.**

(10) **Thereupon the Lord was incensed and He swore,**

(11) **‘None of the men from twenty years up who came out of Egypt shall see the land that I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, for they did not remain loyal to Me –**

(12) **none except Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua son of Nun, for they remained loyal to the Lord.’**

(13) **The Lord was incensed at Israel, and for forty years He made them wander in the wilderness, until the whole generation that had provoked the Lord’s displeasure was gone.**

(14) **And now you, a breed of sinful men, have replaced your fathers, to add still further to the Lord’s wrath against Israel.**

(15) **If you turn away from Him and He abandons them once more in the wilderness, you will bring calamity upon all this people.”**

(14) **And now you, a breed of sinful men, have replaced your fathers, to add still further to the Lord’s wrath against Israel:** Moses addresses the Gadites and the Reubenites with unusual harshness, accusing them of subjecting the entire people to mortal danger. Note, however, that in this case the Torah does say that Moses is angry. This means that he utters these words prudently, not impulsively. The source of such a harsh formulation on Moses’ part is not anger or other emotional turmoil, but his desire to properly influence these two tribes, and the entire nation along with them.

In principle, from the very beginning of the war with Sihon, and especially with Og (who in no way sought to prevent the Israelites from crossing the Jordan), it was clear that their lands would be inhabited by a Jewish population. The only problem was that the Gadites and the Reubenites were talking about removing themselves from the war for the conquest of Canaan. Had that been allowed to happen, it could easily have negatively impacted the other tribes as well.

When these two tribes asked to remain in the Jordan region, this spirit of secession that they had created, wishing to become a separate people, could have destroyed the structure of the entire nation of Israel. But once the Gadites and the Reubenites had participated in the conquest of Canaan, there was no longer any danger that they would separate.

#### § 28.4. THE TRIBES OF GAD AND REUBEN RESPOND

(32:16-19)

טז וַיִּגְשׁוּ אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמְרוּ גְדֵרְתָּ צֹאן נַבְנֶה לְמִקְנֵנוּ פֹּה וְעָרִים  
 לְטַפָּנוּ: יז וַאֲנִיחֵנוּ נַחֲלָץ חֲשִׁים לְפָנָיו בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם־הִבְיֵאֵנָם  
 אֶל־מְקוֹמָם וַיֵּשֶׁב טַפָּנוּ בְּעָרֵי הַמְּבָצָר מִפְּנֵי יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ: יח לֹא נָשׁוּב  
 אֶל־בְּתֵינּוּ עַד הַתְּנַחֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ נַחֲלָתוֹ: ט כִּי לֹא נִנְחַל אִתָּם  
 מֵעֵבֶר לַיַּרְדֵּן וְהִלָּאָה כִּי בָּאָה נַחֲלָתָנוּ אֵלֵינוּ מֵעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן מִזְרָחָה:

(16) Then they stepped up to him and said, “We will build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children.

(17) And we will hasten as shock-troops in the van of the Israelites until we have established them in their home, while our children stay in the fortified towns because of the inhabitants of the land.

(18) We will not return to our homes until every one of the Israelites is in possession of his portion.

(19) But we will not have a share with them in the territory beyond the Jordan, for we have received our share on the east side of the Jordan.”

**(16) Then they stepped up to him and said:** Since the conversation is by now well underway, the introductory phrase, “Then they stepped up to him” is curious. But it means that this marks the beginning of a new phase in the Gadites’ and Reubenites’ thinking. Now that they have heard Moses’ position, rather than merely continuing in the same vein as before the two tribes undergo an internal transformation.

At first they are so taken aback by Moses’ words that they are well-nigh left speechless. And so, they convene among themselves to revise their original proposal, and then “step up” to Moses once again. Thus, Moses’ harsh reaction has moved the tribes of Gad and Reuben to correct their point of view.

**(17-18) And we will hasten as shock-troops in the van of the Israelites until we have established them in their ... We will not return to our homes until every one of the Israelites is in possession of his portion:** The Gadites’ and the Reubenites’ position has changed in two respects:

- (i) They are now prepared to go to war, even ahead of all the other tribes, until total victory is achieved.
- (ii) They understand and acknowledge that Canaan must be settled first, and the Transjordan only after that. They now see the Transjordan as an addition to Canaan, and not vice versa. These two points alone now tip the scales in their favor.

§ 28.5. MOSES’ DEAL WITH THE GADITES  
AND THE REUBENITES (32:20-32)

כ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם מֹשֶׁה אִם־תַּעֲשׂוּן אֶת־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה אִם־תַּחֲלֹצוּ לִפְנֵי יְיָ לְמַלְחָמָה: כֹּא וְעָבַר לְכֶם בְּלִחְלוּץ אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן לִפְנֵי יְיָ עַד הַזֹּרִישׁוּ אֶת־אֲיָבִיו מִפְּנֵיו: כב וּנְכַבְּשָׁה הָאָרֶץ לִפְנֵי יְיָ וְאַחַר תָּשׁוּבוּ וְהִיִּיתֶם נְקִיִּים מִי וּמִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְהִיִּיתָה הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְכֶם לְאַחֲזָה לִפְנֵי יְיָ: כג וְאִם־לֹא תַעֲשׂוּן כִּן הִנֵּה חֲטָאתֶם לַיְי וְדַעוּ חֲטָאתְכֶם אֲשֶׁר תַּמְצֵא אֶתְכֶם: כד בְּנוּ־לְכֶם עָרִים לְטַפְכֶם וּגְדֹרֹת לְעִנְיָכֶם וְהִיצֵא מִפִּיכֶם תַּעֲשׂוּ: כה וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנֵי־גַד וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר עֲבַדִּידָּעֲשׂוּ כְאֲשֶׁר אֲדַנִּי מִצְוָה: כו טַפְּנוּ נַשִּׁינוּ מִקִּנְנוּ וְכָל־בְּהֵמַתְנוּ יְהִיו־שָׁם בְּעָרֵי הַגִּלְעָד: כז וְעֲבַדִּידָּעֲבָרוּ

כָּל־חַלּוּץ צָבָא לִפְנֵי יי לְמַלְחָמָה כְּאֲשֶׁר אָדָנִי דִבֶּר: כח וַיֵּצֵאוּ לָהֶם  
 מֹשֶׁה אֶת אֲלֻעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וְאֶת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נּוּן וְאֶת־רָאשֵׁי אַבּוֹת הַמִּטּוֹת  
 לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: כט וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֲלֵהֶם אִם־יַעֲבְרוּ בְנֵי־גָד וּבְנֵי־רְאוּבֵן |  
 אֲתִכֶּם אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן כָּל־חַלּוּץ לְמַלְחָמָה לִפְנֵי יי וְנִכְבְּשָׁה הָאָרֶץ לִפְנֵיכֶם  
 וּנְתַתֶּם לָהֶם אֶת־אֶרֶץ הַגִּלְעָד לְאֶחְזָה: לו וְאִם־לֹא יַעֲבְרוּ חַלּוּצִים  
 אֲתִכֶּם וְנֶאֱחָזוּ בְּתִכְכֶּם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן: לא וַיַּעֲנוּ בְנֵי־גָד וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן לְאֹמֶר  
 אֵת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יי אֶל־עַבְדֶּיךָ כִּן נַעֲשֶׂה: לב נַחֲנוּ נַעֲבֵר חַלּוּצִים לִפְנֵי יי  
 אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְאֲתָנוּ אֶחְזַת נַחֲלָתָנוּ מֵעַבְרַת לַיַּרְדֵּן:

(20) Moses said to them, “If you do this, if you go to battle as shock-troops, at the instance of the Lord,

(21) and every shock-fighter among you crosses the Jordan, at the instance of the Lord, until He has dispossessed His enemies before Him,

(22) and the land has been subdued, at the instance of the Lord, and then you return – you shall be clear before the Lord and before Israel; and this land shall be your holding under the Lord.

(23) But if you do not do so, you will have sinned against the Lord; and know that your sin will overtake you.

(24) Build towns for your children and sheepfolds for your flocks, but do what you have promised.”

(25) The Gadites and the Reubenites answered Moses, “Your servants will do as my lord commands.

(26) Our children, our wives, our flocks, and all our other livestock will stay behind in the towns of Gilead;

(27) while your servants, all those recruited for war, cross over, at the instance of the Lord, to engage in battle – as my lord orders.”

(28) Then Moses gave instructions concerning them to Eleazar the priest, Joshua son of Nun, and the family heads of the Israelite tribes.

(29) Moses said to them, “If every shock-fighter among the Gadites and the Reubenites crosses the Jordan with you

**to do battle, at the instance of the Lord, and the land is subdued before you, you shall give them the land of Gilead as a holding.**

**(30) But if they do not cross over with you as shock-troops, they shall receive holdings among you in the land of Canaan.”**

**(31) The Gadites and the Reubenites said in reply, “Whatever the Lord has spoken concerning your servants, that we will do.**

**(32) We ourselves will cross over as shock-troops, at the instance of the Lord, into the land of Canaan; and we shall keep our hereditary holding across the Jordan.”**

**(20) If you do this, if you go to battle as shock-troops, at the instance of the Lord:** Moses adjusts the wording. The Gadites and Reubenites had said in their proposal, “And we will hasten as shock-troops in the van of the Israelites” (Num. 32:17), but Moses here formulates it as “at the instance of the Lord.” (The translation we follow somewhat obscures this difference, which is seen more clearly in the Hebrew. The Gadites and the Reubenites said, “before the Israelites” but Moses here says, “before the Lord.”)

Thus, Moses emphasizes that there must be not only solidarity with the people, but a realization of the sacred nature of the war and conquest, which determines the religious (and not merely economic) status of the territorial allotments that the tribes will receive.

**(22) You shall be clear before the Lord and before Israel:** The Hebrew here for “clear” is *nekiyim*, literally, “clean.” From this verse is derived the principle, “One should always strive to be clean not only before God, but also before all people.” That is, it is important not only to behave properly, but to do it in such a way that people understand that you are behaving properly, and are given no reason to suspect otherwise. This is essential for a correctly functioning society.

The Gadites’ and Reubenites’ request to remain behind in the Transjordan, if granted, would be a crime not only against God, but also against the other tribes. Since the lands of Sihon and Og were conquered by all the tribes together, it would be immoral for the Gadites and the Reubenites to benefit from that joint conquest but not reciprocate likewise. Correcting this error in the position of the

Reubenites and Gadites is thus important from both a religious and a social perspective.

**(23) But if you do not do so, you will have sinned against the Lord; and know that your sin will overtake you:** The sin of the the Gadites and the Reubenites is already a *fait accompli*. But if they fulfill their promise, that will atone for their sin, and it will be forgiven.

**(24) Build towns for your children and sheepfolds for your flocks:** Moses changes the order of the planned actions. The Gadites and the Reubenites (Num. 32:16) spoke first of their sheep, and only then of their children, because they are making the economy a priority, and also because it was their flocks, after all, that had motivated their request to stay behind in the Transjordan. But Moses adjusts the priorities, putting children ahead of possessions.

**(25) The Gadites and the Reubenites answered Moses, "... Our children, our wives, our flocks, and all our other livestock will stay behind in the towns of Gilead":** They accept Moses' revised value system: the children first, and only then the flocks.

**(28) Then Moses gave instructions concerning them to Eleazar the priest, Joshua son of Nun, and the family heads of the Israelite tribes:** Since the Gadites and the Reubenites had demonstrated that they might not be completely reliable in the matter of the conquest of Canaan, Moses deems their promises insufficient, and formalizes the agreement by effectively requiring them to take an oath. We see this in Num. 32:31, where they invoke God's name in their promise.

**(29-30) Moses said to them, "If every shock-fighter among the Gadites and the Reubenites crosses the Jordan with you ... But if they do not cross over with you ...":** According to Jewish tradition, a condition specified in an oath must be "doubly worded" – in the positive and also its explicit, converse negative: "If such-and-such, then ..., otherwise ... (the opposite)."

In the course of the negotiations concerning the conquest of Canaan, the Gadites' and Reubenites' position had changed significantly. An actual oath with all its attendant requirements was therefore needed to affirm the change.

**(31) The Gadites and the Reubenites said in reply, “Whatever the Lord has spoken concerning your servants, that we will do:** Here they repeat their promise, now in the form of an oath.

**(32) We ourselves will cross over as shock-troops, at the instance of the Lord, into the land of Canaan; and we shall keep our hereditary holding across the Jordan”:** By mentioning “at the instance of the Lord,” they repeat Moses’ formulation (see Num. 32:20), rather than sticking to their own original wording. Thus they acknowledge and accept that there is a religious (and not merely economic) basis for possessing the territory that they have requested.

§ 28.6. REUBEN, GAD, AND HALF THE TRIBE OF MANASSEH RECEIVE THEIR SETTLEMENT (32:33-42)

לג וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם | מֹשֶׁה לְבִנְיָגָד וְלְבִנְיָרְאוּבֵן וְלַחֲצִי | שֵׁבֶט | מְנַשֶּׁה בֶן־יוֹסֵף  
 אֶת־מַמְלַכַּת סִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֱמֹרִי וְאֶת־מַמְלַכַּת עֹג מֶלֶךְ הַבְּשָׁן הָאֲרָץ  
 לְעֵרִיָּהּ בְּגִבְלַת עַרְי הָאֲרָץ סָבִיב: לֵד וַיְבַנּוּ בְּנֵי־גָד אֶת־דִּיבֹן וְאֶת־  
 עֶטְרֹת וְאֶת עֶרְעֹר: לֵה וְאֶת־עֶטְרֹת שׁוֹפָן וְאֶת־יַעֲזֹר וַיְגִבְהָה: לוֹ וְאֶת־  
 בֵּית נַמְרָה וְאֶת־בֵּית הַרְזֹן עַרְי מְבַצֵּר וַיְגַדְדֹת צֶאֱן: לוֹ וְבִנְיָרְאוּבֵן  
 בָּנוּ אֶת־חֶשְׁבֹּן וְאֶת־אֶלְעָלָא וְאֶת קַרְיָתִים: לֵה וְאֶת־נָבוֹ וְאֶת־בַּעַל  
 מַעֲזֹן מוֹסַבֶּת שֵׁם וְאֶת־שִׁבְמָה וַיִּקְרְאוּ בְשֵׁמֹת אֶת־שְׁמוֹת הָעָרִים  
 אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ: לט וַיִּלְכוּ בְנֵי מְכִיר בֶן־מְנַשֶּׁה גְלַעָדָה וַיִּלְכְּדוּהָ וַיִּזְרַשׂ אֶת־  
 הָאֱמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר־בָּהּ: מ וַיִּתֵּן מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַגְּלַעָד לְמְכִיר בֶן־מְנַשֶּׁה וַיֵּשֶׁב  
 בָּהּ: מא וַיֵּאִיר בֶן־מְנַשֶּׁה הַלֵּד וַיִּלְכְּד אֶת־חֹתְמֵיהֶם וַיִּקְרָא אֶתְהֶן חֹת  
 יֵאִיר: מב וַנְּבַח הַלֵּד וַיִּלְכְּד אֶת־קַנְתָּ וְאֶת־בְּנֵיהֶּ וַיִּקְרָא לָהּ גִּבְח  
 בְּשֵׁמוֹ:

**(33) So Moses assigned to them – to the Gadites, the Reubenites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh son of Joseph – the kingdom of Sihon king of the Amorites and the kingdom of King Og of Bashan, the land with its various cities and the territories of their surrounding towns.**

**(34) The Gadites rebuilt Dibon, Ataroth, Aroer,**

**(35) Atroth-shophan, Jazer, Jogbehah,**

**(36) Beth-nimrah, and Beth-haran as fortified towns or as enclosures for flocks.**

**(37) The Reubenites rebuilt Heshbon, Elealeh, Kiriathaim,**

**(38) Nebo, Baal-meon – some names being changed – and Sibmah; they gave [their own] names to towns that they rebuilt.**

**(39) The descendants of Machir son of Manasseh went to Gilead and captured it, dispossessing the Amorites who were there;**

**(40) so Moses gave Gilead to Machir son of Manasseh, and he settled there.**

**(41) Jair son of Manasseh went and captured their villages, which he renamed Havvoth-jair.**

**(42) And Nobah went and captured Kenath and its dependencies, renaming it Nobah after himself.**

(33) So Moses assigned to them – to the Gadites, the Reubenites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh son of Joseph: After the Gadites and Reubenites had agreed to fight first and possess their land later, the issue seemed resolved. But then, suddenly, Moses says that also half the tribe of Manasseh will settle in the Transjordan region, and will receive the northern Gilead and Bashan (what we know as the Golan Heights, and the region of Syria that is adjacent to it).

There are two possible explanations for this:

(i) The tribe of Manasseh too is needed to forge the connection of the two regions of the Land of Israel, the Transjordan and Canaan. The very name “Manasseh” denotes memory (Gen. 41:51). This attribute makes the tribe of Manasseh the most suited to fostering communication, based on preservation of the common memory, between different segments of the Jewish nation.

(ii) The territories that Manasseh now receives had already been conquered by them in the past, and so already belonged to them. Thus, Moses did not now actually convey this land to them, but only confirmed their rights to it.

It is also possible to combine both of these explanations. That is, only at this moment has Moses come to understand that the tribe of Manasseh's exercise of its land rights will strengthen the connection of all three tribes in the Transjordan region. And so he mentions them here all together.

**(33, 39) And the half-tribe of Manasseh son of Joseph ... The descendants of Machir son of Manasseh went to Gilead and captured it:** The Hebrew verb used here is *L-K-D*, which can mean “to conquer” and also “to unite.” We can understand this as indicating that Manasseh here is renewing its former possession of these territories. Indeed, the book of *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, Chronicles, reports that the Manasseh families had previously owned land in Gilead (1 Chron. 2:22).

We have already noted earlier<sup>81</sup> that the descendants of Joseph, the man who had long been second-in-command to Pharaoh in Egypt, were not enslaved there as were the other tribes, and were thus in a position to conduct conquests. Apparently, this is why the text emphasizes here that Manasseh was the son of Joseph – i.e., a part of Gilead had belonged to Manasseh over two hundred years earlier, and now, after the Amorites had conquered this land, the tribe of Manasseh was reclaiming what was already theirs.

Of course, the settlement of a portion of the tribes in the Transjordan is fundamentally problematic, because the presence of a natural border, the Jordan River, will exert a powerful influence on their identity. In the book of Joshua (22:10-34) we find an episode where the tribes of the Transjordan built an altar in order not to lose contact with the rest of the nation, and not to be forgotten. But their motivations were incorrectly interpreted by the other tribes, who suspected them of wanting to secede. These fears on both sides came very close to creating an actual conflict.

Moses here has a premonition of this problem and seeks to strengthen the connection among all parts of the nation. And since it is the tribe of Manasseh that demonstrates a particularly strong

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<sup>81</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on Exod. 17:9 (the episode of Joshua's war with Amalek).

connection to the land, and an understanding of its sanctity, as also manifested in the episode of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num. 27:1 ff.), Moses establishes that this tribe will become a connecting link between the Canaan and Transjordan regions of the Land of Israel.

Moreover, the tribe of Manasseh was especially numerous, enough to populate both of those regions. If Manasseh were to completely settle in the Canaan region, its territory would significantly exceed that of the other tribes, and this could threaten the balance of power necessary for maintaining the unity of all the tribes of Israel.

**(38) They gave [their own] names to towns that they rebuilt:** Because the former names had honored pagan deities, the Gadites and Reubenites replaced them.

**(39-40) The descendants of Machir son of Manasseh went to Gilead and captured it, dispossessing the Amorites who were there; so Moses gave Gilead to Machir son of Manasseh, and he settled there:** The members of the tribe of Manasseh themselves carry out the conquest of Gilead, but Moses confirms their right to do so.

**(41) Jair son of Manasseh went and captured their villages, which he renamed Havvoth-jair. And Nobah went and captured Kenath and its dependencies, renaming it Nobah after himself:** Jair and Nobah were descendants of Manasseh. All of these families actively participated in the conquest of the land.

**WEEKLY  
PORTION 10**

**MAS'EI**



## § 29. THE CONCLUSION OF THE WILDERNESS JOURNEY

### § 29.1. REPRISING THE BEGINNING OF THE WILDERNESS JOURNEY (33:1-4)

« אֱלֹהֵי מִסְעֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָצְאוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְצַבְאֹתָם בְּיַד־  
מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן: בַּיּוֹמֵיכֶתֶב מֹשֶׁה אֶת־מוֹצְאֵיהֶם לְמִסְעֵיהֶם עַל־פִּי יְיָ וְאֵלֶּה  
מִסְעֵיהֶם לְמוֹצְאֵיהֶם: גַּ' וַיִּסְעוּ מֵרַעְמֵסֶס בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן בְּחַמְשָׁה  
עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן מִמִּחְרַת הַפֶּסַח יָצְאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּיַד רָמְהָ  
לְעֵינֵי כָל־מִצְרַיִם: ד' וּמִצְרַיִם מִקְבְּרֵיהֶם אֶת אֲשֶׁר הִכָּה יְיָ בָהֶם כָּל־בְּכוֹר  
וּבְאֵלֵיהֶם עָשָׂה יְיָ שְׁפָטִים:

(33:1) These were the marches of the Israelites who started out from the land of Egypt, troop by troop, in the charge of Moses and Aaron.

(2) Moses recorded the starting points of their various marches as directed by the Lord. Their marches, by starting points, were as follows:

(3) They set out from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month. It was on the morrow of the passover offering that the Israelites started out defiantly, in plain view of all the Egyptians.

(4) The Egyptians meanwhile were burying those among them whom the Lord had struck down, every first-born – whereby the Lord executed judgment on their gods.

**(1) These were the marches of the Israelites who started out from the land of Egypt, troop by troop, in the charge of Moses and Aaron:** Before the nation enters the Land of Israel, it is necessary to recapitulate the wanderings in the wilderness, to give a retrospective of the path traveled.

**Troop by troop:** The Hebrew is *le-tziv'otam*, literally: “by their hosts.” Here the word *tzava*, “army,” emphasizes that the people of Israel are not a homogeneous mass, but a complex, organized structure consisting of a hierarchy of tribes and families.

**(2) Moses recorded the starting points of their various marches as directed by the Lord:** This means that the recording of the points along the way was also made at God’s command. The purpose was to preserve the memory of the lessons that the Israelites learned as they crossed the wilderness.

We cannot identify with precision all the geographical locations that will be mentioned here. Some of them, e.g., Dophkah and Alush, are mentioned here for the first time. The Midrash therefore focuses on the spiritual meaning of the names enumerated in this list of encampments.

There are two ways to interpret these names: the rational approach, and the mystical approach.

The rational option compares the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness to a king’s journey with his son. At the conclusion of the journey the king orders to compile a list of all the places they have visited, as a means of remembering the details of the trip. According to this approach, brief hints should accompany the names of the places visited, indicating what actually happened at each location. Here, in the case of the Israelites’ journey through the wilderness, each encampment in the list alludes to some crisis that the people surmounted there, and the dynamics of their progress. We will soon offer some specific examples that follow this first mode of interpretation.

The second – mystical – option is a Kabbalistic decoding of the place names, according to which it is believed that the forty-two place names of this chapter correspond to the forty-two-letter name of God, the *Shem Ha-Meforash*, the “Ineffable Divine Name,” that must never be actually pronounced except once a year on Yom Kippur, in the Tem-

ple, by the High Priest. According to this interpretation, the scheme of successive encampments in the wilderness corresponds to the structure and history of the entire universe. These forty-two site names are projected onto the full expanse of human history, that is, onto the history of Divine revelation – of God making Himself known to all of humanity.

It is important to note that the transitions were not evenly distributed over the entire forty years of travel. There were forty-two encampment sites in total, but about half of them happened in the first year and the last year of wanderings. Thus, during the thirty-eight “intermediate” wilderness years there were only seventeen encampments.

From this we can conclude that at the beginning, during the first year of wanderings, the dynamics of transformation in the people were quite rapid. Following that there is a long interval of relative constancy, during which the Israelites sometimes lived for a number of years in one place, while engaging in their primary occupation of studying the Torah as taught to them by Moses. Then, in the last of the forty years, the new generation experiences a rapid dynamic of development, as they prepare to conquer and possess their new land.

**(3) They set out from Rameses:** The list of the names of the encampments begins with a brief retrospective of the Exodus itself. Rameses is mentioned in the Torah quite early on, in the book of Genesis (47:11), as the place where the Israelites first settled at the very beginning of their life in Egypt. And here Rameses is mentioned as their final location there before the Exodus. That is, at the Exodus Israel’s circle of life in Egypt was fully closed. Having received everything for which they came to Egypt, and accomplished everything they needed to achieve there, they can leave Egypt and move on to their next levels of achievement.

**In the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month. It was on the morrow of the passover offering that the Israelites started out:** The Passover sacrifice was slaughtered on the fourteenth of Nisan, and then eaten after nightfall and throughout the night. The next day, on the morning of the fifteenth of Nisan, the actual exodus from Egypt took place (Exod. 12:6-13, 21-42).

**Defiantly:** *Be-yad ramah*, literally: “With a high hand,” that is, in plain sight for all to see. The Israelites left Egypt not furtively as fugitives in the night, but openly – feeling and knowing that God had liberated them from their Egyptian bondage, and that neither the Egyptians nor anyone else could possibly stand in their way.

(3-4) ... in plain view of all the Egyptians. The Egyptians meanwhile were burying those among them whom the Lord had struck down, every first-born – whereby the Lord executed judgment on their gods: The Exodus took place against the background of the Egyptians’ utter powerlessness. They could not oppose the Exodus, because their own physical and spiritual life had been completely destroyed.

#### § 29.2. THE STAGES OF THE WILDERNESS JOURNEY ENUMERATED (33:5-49)

The encampments during the first year and a half after the exodus, until the sending of the spies:

ה וַיֵּסְעוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵרַעַמְסֵס וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּסֹכֹת: ו וַיֵּסְעוּ מִסֹּכֹת וַיַּחֲנוּ  
בְּאֶתְם אֲשֶׁר בְּקֶצֶה הַמִּדְבָּר: ז וַיֵּסְעוּ מֵאֶתְם וַיָּשֶׁב עַל־פִּי הַחִירָת  
אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי בְּעַל צְפוֹן וַיַּחֲנוּ לִפְנֵי מִגְדֹּל: ח וַיֵּסְעוּ מִפְּנֵי הַחִירָת  
וַיַּעֲבְרוּ בְּתוֹךְ־הַיָּם הַמִּדְבָּרָה וַיֵּלְכוּ דֶרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבַר אֶתְם  
וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִרְהָ: ט וַיֵּסְעוּ מִמִּרְהָ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֵילָמָה וּבְאֵילִם שְׁתֵּים עָשָׂרָה  
עֵינָת מַיִם וּשְׁבַעִים תְּמָרִים וַיַּחֲנוּ־שָׁם: י וַיֵּסְעוּ מֵאֵילִם וַיַּחֲנוּ עַל־  
יַם־סוּף: יא וַיֵּסְעוּ מִיַם־סוּף וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבַר־סִין: יב וַיֵּסְעוּ מִמִּדְבַר־סִין  
וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּדַפְקָה: יג וַיֵּסְעוּ מִדַּפְקָה וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּאֵלוֹשׁ: יד וַיֵּסְעוּ מֵאֵלוֹשׁ וַיַּחֲנוּ  
בְּרַפִּידִם וְלֹא־הָיָה שָׁם מַיִם לָעָם לְשָׁתוֹת: טו וַיֵּסְעוּ מִרַפִּידִם וַיַּחֲנוּ  
בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי: טז וַיֵּסְעוּ מִמִּדְבַר סִינַי וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּקִבְרֹת הַתְּאֵוָה: יז וַיֵּסְעוּ  
מִקִּבְרֹת הַתְּאֵוָה וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּחֻצְרֹת: יח וַיֵּסְעוּ מִחֻצְרֹת וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּרֹתְמָה:

(5) The Israelites set out from Rameses and encamped at Succoth.

(6) They set out from Succoth and encamped at Etham, which is on the edge of the wilderness.

- (7) They set out from Etham and turned about toward Pi-hahiroth, which faces Baal-zephon, and they encamped before Migdol.
- (8) They set out from Pene-hahiroth and passed through the sea into the wilderness; and they made a three-days' journey in the wilderness of Etham and encamped at Marah.
- (9) They set out from Marah and came to Elim. There were twelve springs in Elim and seventy palm trees, so they encamped there.
- (10) They set out from Elim and encamped by the Sea of Reeds.
- (11) They set out from the Sea of Reeds and encamped in the wilderness of Sin.
- (12) They set out from the wilderness of Sin and encamped at Dophkah.
- (13) They set out from Dophkah and encamped at Alush.
- (14) They set out from Alush and encamped at Rephidim; it was there that the people had no water to drink.
- (15) They set out from Rephidim and encamped in the wilderness of Sinai.
- (16) They set out from the wilderness of Sinai and encamped at Kibroth-hattaavah.
- (17) They set out from Kibroth-hattaavah and encamped at Hazeroth.
- (18) They set out from Hazeroth and encamped at Rithmah.

The encampments during the middle thirty-eight years:

ט וַיִּסְעוּ מִרְתֵּמָה וַיֵּחָגוּ בְרִמֹן פְּרִיז: כ וַיִּסְעוּ מִרִמֹן פְּרִיז וַיֵּחָגוּ  
בְּלִבְנָה: כא וַיִּסְעוּ מִלִּבְנָה וַיֵּחָגוּ בְּרִסָּה: כב וַיִּסְעוּ מִרִסָּה וַיֵּחָגוּ  
בְּקַהֲלָתָה: כג וַיִּסְעוּ מִקַּהֲלָתָה וַיֵּחָגוּ בְּהַר־שִׁפְרָה: כד וַיִּסְעוּ מֵהַר־שִׁפְרָה  
וַיֵּחָגוּ בְּחַרְדָּה: כה וַיִּסְעוּ מִחַרְדָּה וַיֵּחָגוּ בְּמִקְהֵלָת: כו וַיִּסְעוּ מִמִּקְהֵלָת  
וַיֵּחָגוּ בְּתַחַת: כז וַיִּסְעוּ מִתַּחַת וַיֵּחָגוּ בְּתַרְחָה: כח וַיִּסְעוּ מִתַּרְחָה וַיֵּחָגוּ  
בְּמִתְקָה: כט וַיִּסְעוּ מִמִּתְקָה וַיֵּחָגוּ בְּחִשְׁמֹנָה: ל וַיִּסְעוּ מִחִשְׁמֹנָה וַיֵּחָגוּ  
בְּמִסְרוֹת: לא וַיִּסְעוּ מִמִּסְרוֹת וַיֵּחָגוּ בְּבִגְיָעָקוֹן: לב וַיִּסְעוּ מִבִּגְיָעָקוֹן

וַיִּחַנוּ בְּחַר הַגְּדִגָּד: לֵב וַיִּסְעוּ מִתַּחַר הַגְּדִגָּד וַיִּחַנוּ בְּיִטְבְּתָה: לֵב וַיִּסְעוּ  
מִיִּטְבְּתָה וַיִּחַנוּ בְּעֵבְרָנָה: לֵב וַיִּסְעוּ מִעֵבְרָנָה וַיִּחַנוּ בְּעֵצִין גְּבֵר:

(19) They set out from Rithmah and encamped at Rimmon-perez.

(20) They set out from Rimmon-perez and encamped at Libnah.

(21) They set out from Libnah and encamped at Rissah.

(22) They set out from Rissah and encamped at Kehelath.

(23) They set out from Kehelath and encamped at Mount Shepher.

(24) They set out from Mount Shepher and encamped at Haradah.

(25) They set out from Haradah and encamped at Makheloth.

(26) They set out from Makheloth and encamped at Tahath.

(27) They set out from Tahath and encamped at Terah.

(28) They set out from Terah and encamped at Mithkah.

(29) They set out from Mithkah and encamped at Hashmonah.

(30) They set out from Hashmonah and encamped at Moseroth.

(31) They set out from Moseroth and encamped at Bene-jaakan.

(32) They set out from Bene-jaakan and encamped at Hor-haggidgad.

(33) They set out from Hor-haggidgad and encamped at Jotbath.

(34) They set out from Jotbath and encamped at Abronah.

(35) They set out from Abronah and encamped at Ezion-geber.

The encampments of the fortieth year:

: לֵב וַיִּסְעוּ מִעֵצִין גְּבֵר וַיִּחַנוּ בְּמִדְבַּר-עֵין הוּא קֹדֶשׁ: לֵב וַיִּסְעוּ מִקֹּדֶשׁ  
וַיִּחַנוּ בְּחַר הַחֵר בקצה ארץ אדום: לֵב וַיַּעַל אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן אֶל-הָרַ

הָהָרַ עַל־פִּי יִי וַיָּמַת שָׁם בְּשָׁנַת הָאָרְבָּעִים לְצֵאת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ  
 מִצְרַיִם בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַחֲמִישִׁי בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ: לֹט וְאֶהְיֶה בְּיָשָׁלְשׁ וְעֶשְׂרִים  
 וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה בְּמָתוֹ בְּהָר הָהָר:

מ וַיִּשְׁמַע הַכְּנַעֲנִי מִלֶּדֶךְ עֶרְדֹּ וְהוּא־יָשֵׁב בְּגִבַּב בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן בְּבֵאֵ בְּנֵי  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל: מֵא וַיִּסְעוּ מֵהָר הָהָר וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּצַלְמֹנָה: מֵב וַיִּסְעוּ מִצַּלְמֹנָה וַיַּחֲנוּ  
 בְּפוּנֹן: מֵג וַיִּסְעוּ מִפוּנֹן וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּאַבְתָּ: מֵד וַיִּסְעוּ מֵאַבְתָּ וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּעֵי  
 הָעֵבְרִים בְּגִבּוֹל מוֹאָב: מֵה וַיִּסְעוּ מֵעֵיִם וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּדִיבֹן גָּד: מֵו וַיִּסְעוּ  
 מִדִּיבֹן גָּד וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּעַלְמֹן דְּבַלְתִּימָה: מֵז וַיִּסְעוּ מֵעַלְמֹן דְּבַלְתִּימָה וַיַּחֲנוּ  
 בְּהַרֵי הָעֵבְרִים לְפָנֵי נֶבֹ: מֶח וַיִּסְעוּ מֵהַרֵי הָעֵבְרִים וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּעַרְבַת  
 מוֹאָב עַל יַרְדֵּן יְרוּחַ: מֵט וַיַּחֲנוּ עַל־הַיַּרְדֵּן מִבֵּית הַיִּשְׁמָת עַד אַבְל  
 הַשָּׁטִים בְּעַרְבַת מוֹאָב:

(36) They set out from Ezion-geber and encamped in the wilderness of Zin, that is, Kadesh.

(37) They set out from Kadesh and encamped at Mount Hor, on the edge of the land of Edom.

(38) Aaron the priest ascended Mount Hor at the command of the Lord and died there, in the fortieth year after the Israelites had left the land of Egypt, on the first day of the fifth month.

(39) Aaron was a hundred and twenty-three years old when he died on Mount Hor.

(40) And the Canaanite, king of Arad, who dwelt in the Negeb, in the land of Canaan, learned of the coming of the Israelites.

(41) They set out from Mount Hor and encamped at Zalmonah.

(42) They set out from Zalmonah and encamped at Punon.

(43) They set out from Punon and encamped at Oboth.

(44) They set out from Oboth and encamped at Iye-abarim, in the territory of Moab.

(45) They set out from Iyim and encamped at Dibon-gad.

(46) They set out from Dibon-gad and encamped at Almon-diblathaim.

(47) **They set out from Almon-diblathaim and encamped in the hills of Abarim, before Nebo.**

(48) **They set out from the hills of Abarim and encamped in the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho;**

(49) **they encamped by the Jordan from Beth-jeshimoth as far as Abel-shittim, in the steppes of Moab.**

**(5) The Israelites set out:** As already noted, the movements and encampments can be divided into three distinct periods:

(i) The first one and a half years after the Exodus, before the spies were sent, there were fifteen encampments, although almost the entire first year was spent at Mount Sinai. Thus, there were actually fourteen different encampments in the space of six months, which reflects the rapid personal and spiritual advancement at the onset of the journey.

(ii) Over the next thirty-eight years there were seventeen encampments. Sometimes the nation lived in the same place for several years, learning the Torah from Moses. During this period a new generation came of age.

(iii) In the fortieth and final year in the wilderness there were ten encampments, reflecting the rapid transformation of the new generation, as they prepared to conquer and possess the Land of Israel.

**(5) The Israelites set out from Rameses and encamped at Succoth:** The Midrash considers it no coincidence that the name of this encampment is the same as the festival of Succoth (in English usually spelled Sukkot), which celebrates the future Messianic deliverance of mankind. The Midrash takes this as an indication that – although Passover and Sukkot are always observed six months apart – ideally speaking Sukkot should have followed immediately after Passover.

In other words, the universal Messianic redemption of all of mankind was to soon follow the Jewish people's national redemption, as its direct consequence. Ideally, the Exodus from Egypt could have immediately brought the Messiah into the world. But in reality things did not work out quite that way, and a very long gap between those two

events therefore had to occur in human history – a gap that human-kind is still striving to bridge even today.

**(6) They set out from Succoth and encamped at Etham, which is on the edge of the wilderness:** Since the immediate deliverance of all mankind is unattainable, Israel sets out from Succoth on a journey through the wilderness.

**(7) They set out from Etham and turned about toward Pi-hahiroth, which faces Baal-zephon, and they encamped before Migdol:** However, a direct path to the wilderness did not exist, and it was necessary to turn back to Pi-hahiroth, “the Valley [between two tall, erect rocks, according to Rashi commentary] of Freedom,” which was located opposite Baal-zephon, “Lord (i.e., deity) of the North.” (That is, of the Land of Israel, which is located north of Egypt.) And there, before Migdol – which means “tower” – the Israelites came very close to being overtaken by Pharaoh’s cavalry.

**(8) They set out from Pene-hahiroth and passed through the sea into the wilderness:** Only after crossing the Sea of Reeds were the Israelites able to begin their journey through the wilderness.

**And they made a three-days’ journey in the wilderness of Etham and encamped at Marah:** Marah means “bitter.” The place was so named because the water there was undrinkable. The full story was told in the book of Exodus (15:23-25):

“They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’ So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There He made for them a fixed rule, and there He put them to the test.”

**(9) They set out from Marah and came to Elim. There were twelve springs in Elim and seventy palm trees, so they encamped there:** After those initial difficulties of the journey were overcome, the Israelites stopped at a place that represents the ideal world, in which the twelve tribes of the Jewish nation nourish the seventy nations of the world.

**(10) They set out from Elim and encamped by the Sea of Reeds:** Although at Elim they were able to visualize the ideal, the time had not

yet come to realize it. The lessons of the past has not yet been learned, and in order to assimilate those lessons, the nascent Jewish nation had to return once again to the Sea of Reeds.

**(11-13) They set out from the Sea of Reeds and encamped in the wilderness of Sin ... and encamped at Dophkah ... and encamped at Alush:** There is no mention of either Dophkah or Alush in the book of Exodus; thus, we do not know what exactly the Jewish people came to understand and how they advanced in those places.

**(14) They set out from Alush and encamped at Rephidim; it was there that the people had no water to drink:** In Rephidim there was another episode of lack of water, which caused the people to grumble yet again, and which God addressed by having Moses miraculously extract water from a rock (Exod. 17:1-7). Also in Rephidim, Israel was attacked by Amalek and successfully waged war with that villainous nation (Exod. 17:8-16).

**(15) They set out from Rephidim and encamped in the wilderness of Sinai:** After the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the newborn Jewish nation remained encamped there for almost a year.

**(16) They set out from the wilderness of Sinai and encamped at Kibroth-hattaavah:** As described earlier (Num. 11), this is already the beginning of the journey from Sinai to the Land of Israel.

**(18) And encamped at Rithmah:** Rithmah is identified with the Paran wilderness, from which Moses sent the twelve spies to scout out future Land of Israel (Num. 12:16, 13:1 ff.).

**(19) They set out from Rithmah and encamped at Rimmon-perez:** Here begin the encampments of the thirty-eight-year wilderness traversal, a long time interval that was needed in order for the old generation to pass away, and a new generation to come of age. Most of these places cannot be identified, which we would need to do in order to understand just what lessons were learned at those locations.

**(35) And encamped at Ezion-geber:** Ezion-geber is identified with Elath – modern-day Eilat. Indeed, in Deut. 2:8 the two are mentioned together: “We then moved on, ... away from the road of the Arabah, away from Elath and Ezion-geber...”

**(36) They set out from Ezion-geber and encamped in the wilderness of Zin, that is, Kadesh:** Miriam died and was buried here

(Num. 20:1). It is the beginning of the fortieth and final year of the journey through the wilderness.

**(37-38) They set out from Kadesh and encamped at Mount Hor, on the edge of the land of Edom. Aaron the priest ... died there:** Aaron's death coincides with Israel's approach to Edomite territory; i.e., it is the end of the actual wilderness and the beginning of inhabited lands. This marks the onset of Israel's conflict with other nations of the world.

**(40) And the Canaanite, king of Arad, who dwelt in the Negeb, in the land of Canaan, learned of the coming of the Israelites:** Immediately after Aaron's death a military conflict ensued, as recounted in detail in Num. 21:1-3. It is mentioned here again, but without elaboration.

**(49-50) They encamped ... in the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho:** This is the geographical terminus of the forty years of wanderings.

**(49) They encamped by the Jordan from Beth-jeshimoth as far as Abel-shittim, in the steppes of Moab:** Thus, the extent of Israel's entire camp can be estimated at about 20 kilometers (12 miles).

## § 30. THE CANAANITE NATIONS AND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL

### § 30.1. THE COMMAND TO DRIVE OUT THE INHABITANTS OF CANAAN (33:50-56)

גוֹדְבָר יִי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב עַל־יַרְדֵּן יְרֵחוֹ לֵאמֹר: נֹא דַבֵּר  
אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן אֶל־  
אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן: נַבְּוְהוֹרְשֶׁתֶם אֶת־כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵיכֶם וְאַבְדֹתֶם  
אֶת כָּל־מִשְׁכֵּי־תֵימָם וְאֵת כָּל־צִלְמֵי מִסְכֹּתָם תִּאֲבְדוּ וְאֵת כָּל־בְּמוֹתָם  
תִּשְׁמִידוּ: נַבְּוְהוֹרְשֶׁתֶם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְיִשְׁבְּתֶם־בָּהּ כִּי לָכֶם נָתַתִּי אֶת־  
הָאָרֶץ לְרֵשֶׁת אַתֶּם: נַדְוְהִתְנַחַלְתֶּם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ בְּגוֹרֵל לְמִשְׁפַּחְתֵיכֶם  
לְרֵב תִּרְבּוּ אֶת־נַחֲלֹתוֹ וְלִמְעַט תִּמְעֵיט אֶת־נַחֲלֹתוֹ אֶל אֲשֶׁר־יֵצֵא  
לּוֹ שָׁמָּה הַגּוֹרֵל לּוֹ יִהְיֶה לְמִטּוֹת אַבְתֵיכֶם תִּתְנַחֲלוּ: נַהּוְאִם־לֹא  
תוֹרִישׁוּ אֶת־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵיכֶם וְהָיָה אֲשֶׁר תוֹתִירוּ מֵהֶם לְשָׂכִים  
בְּעֵינֵיכֶם וְלִצְנִינִם בְּצַדֵיכֶם וְצָרְרוּ אֲתֶכֶם עַל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם יֹשְׁבִים  
בָּהּ: נוּוְהָיָה כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּמְיִיתִי לַעֲשׂוֹת לָהֶם אֲעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם:

(50) In the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho, the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

(51) Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan,

(52) you shall dispossess all the inhabitants of the land; you shall destroy all their figured objects; you shall destroy all

**their molten images, and you shall demolish all their cult places.**

**(53) And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have assigned the land to you to possess.**

**(54) You shall apportion the land among yourselves by lot, clan by clan: with larger groups increase the share, with smaller groups reduce the share. Wherever the lot falls for anyone, that shall be his. You shall have your portions according to your ancestral tribes.**

**(55) But if you do not dispossess the inhabitants of the land, those whom you allow to remain shall be stings in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land in which you live;**

**(56) so that I will do to you what I planned to do to them.**

**(50) In the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho, the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:** The Torah especially marks the location – on the very threshold of the land of Israel – of the giving of these commandments, which are called “the covenant in the steppes of Moab” (cf. Num. 36:13; Deut. 28:69), because their purpose is to prepare the Jewish people for conquering and possessing the land.

**(52) You shall dispossess all the inhabitants of the land; you shall destroy all their figured objects; you shall destroy all their molten images, and you shall demolish all their cult places:** This commandment was already mentioned earlier (Exod. 23:31, 34:11), but is repeated here in greater detail. The Torah’s persistent repetition of these points is perhaps related not only to the impending conquest, but also to the tragic experience gained as the result of the daughters of Moab and Midian having seduced the people into idolatry.

At the same time, the severe attitude toward the peoples of Canaan is attributed in this verse exclusively to their practice of idolatry. (In other places in the Torah their perverted morality is also cited; see, e.g., Lev. 18:3.) Since the Land of Israel, as the future center of spiritual influence on humanity, must at all times be free of any hint of idolatry, all such practices must be completely eradicated from its territories. However, those Canaanite peoples who were willing to recognize

Jewish rule in the Land, and to abandon their idolatrous practices – and the perverted moral norms associated with them – were allowed to remain.

**(53) And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have assigned the land to you to possess:** The commandment to live in the Land of Israel entails two closely related aspects: possession and settlement. Possession of the Land of Israel by the Jewish nation is a *sine qua non* for fulfilling its mission to bring the Divine light to humanity.

**(54) You shall apportion the land among yourselves by lot, clan by clan:** The use of lots to apportion the land among the tribes prevented a situation where a large segment of the population might settle on only a small part of the country's territory. The lots assure that the entire country will be evenly populated.

**(55) But if you do not dispossess the inhabitants of the land, those whom you allow to remain shall be stings in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land in which you live:** This harsh warning is here repeated yet again (see, e.g., Exod. 23:31 and Lev. 18:25), precisely because it is the nature of the Jewish people to be kind and hospitable. They would be just as happy not to expel former inhabitants from the land, and would downplay the threat that allowing them to remain entails.

### § 30.2. THE BOUNDARIES OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL (34:1-15)

א וַיִּדְבֹר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב צֹ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי־  
 אַתֶּם בָּאִים אֶל־הָאָרֶץ כְּנַעַן וְזֹאת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תִּפְּלוּ לָכֶם בְּנַחֲלֶהּ אֶרֶץ  
 כְּנַעַן לְגַבְלֹתֶיהָ: ג וְהָיָה לָכֶם פְּאֵת־נֶגֶב מִמִּדְבַר־צֹן עַל־יַד־אֲדָוִם וְהָיָה  
 לָכֶם גְּבוּל נֶגֶב מִקֶּצֶה יַם־הַמֶּלַח קִדְמָה: ד וְנֹסֵב לָכֶם הַגְּבוּל מִנֶּגֶב  
 לְמַעַלָּה עַקְרָבִים וְעֵבֶר צִנָּה וְהָיָה (וְהָיוּ) תּוֹצְאֹתָיו מִנֶּגֶב לְקִדְשׁ  
 בְּרֹנֶט וְיֹצֵא חֲצֵר־אֲדָר וְעֵבֶר עֲצְמֹנָה: ה וְנֹסֵב הַגְּבוּל מִעֲצְמוֹן גַּחְלָה  
 מִצָּרִים וְהָיוּ תּוֹצְאֹתָיו הַיַּמָּה: ו וְגְבוּל יָם וְהָיָה לָכֶם הַיָּם הַגָּדוֹל וְגְבוּל  
 זֶה־יְהִיָּה לָכֶם גְּבוּל יָם: ז וְזֶה־יְהִיָּה לָכֶם גְּבוּל צְפּוֹן מִן־הַיָּם הַגָּדוֹל  
 תִּתְּאוּ לָכֶם הַר הַהָר: ח מֵהַר הַהָר תִּתְּאוּ לְבֵא חֲמַת וְהָיוּ תּוֹצְאֹת

הַגְּבֹל צְדָדָה: ט וַיֵּצֵא הַגְּבֹל זַפְרָנָה וְהָיוּ תּוֹצְאָתָיו חֲצֵר עֵינָן זֶה-  
 יִהְיֶה לָּכֶם גְּבוּל צָפוֹן: י וְהֵתְאוּיֹתֶם לָכֶם לַגְּבוּל קְדָמָה מִחֲצֵר עֵינָן  
 שְׂפָמָה: יא וַיֵּרֶד הַגְּבֹל מִשְׁפֵּם הָרְבֵלָה מִקְדָּם לְעֵין וַיֵּרֶד הַגְּבֹל וּמִחָה  
 עַל-כַּתֵּף יַם-כַּנְנֶרֶת קְדָמָה: יב וַיֵּרֶד הַגְּבֹל הַיַּרְדֵּנָה וְהָיוּ תּוֹצְאָתָיו יַם  
 הַמֶּלַח זֹאת תְּהִיָּה לָכֶם הָאָרֶץ לַגְּבֻלְתֶּיהָ סָבִיב: יג וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-בְּנֵי  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר זֹאת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנַחֲלוּ אֹתָהּ בְּגוּלָל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְיָ  
 לַתֵּת לְתַשְׁעַת הַמְּטוֹת וַחֲצֵי הַמְּטָה: יד כִּי לָקַחוּ מְטָה בְּנֵי הָרְאוּבֵנִי  
 לְבַיִת אַבְתָּם וּמְטָה בְּנֵי-הַגָּדִי לְבַיִת אַבְתָּם וַחֲצֵי מְטָה מִנְּשֵׂה לָקְחוּ  
 גַּחְלָתָם: טו שְׁנֵי הַמְּטוֹת וַחֲצֵי הַמְּטָה לָקְחוּ גַּחְלָתָם מֵעֶבֶר לַיַּרְדֵּן יִרְחוּ  
 קְדָמָה מִזְרָחָה:

(1) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

(2) Instruct the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land of Canaan, this is the land that shall fall to you as your portion, the land of Canaan with its various boundaries:

(3) Your southern sector shall extend from the wilderness of Zin alongside Edom. Your southern boundary shall start on the east from the tip of the Dead Sea.

(4) Your boundary shall then turn to pass south of the ascent of Akrabbim and continue to Zin, and its limits shall be south of Kadesh-barnea, reaching Hazar-addar and continuing to Azmon.

(5) From Azmon the boundary shall turn toward the Wadi of Egypt and terminate at the Sea.

(6) For the western boundary you shall have the coast of the Great Sea; that shall serve as your western boundary.

(7) This shall be your northern boundary: Draw a line from the Great Sea to Mount Hor;

(8) from Mount Hor draw a line to Lebo-hamath, and let the boundary reach Zedad.

(9) The boundary shall then run to Ziphron and terminate at Hazar-enan. That shall be your northern boundary.

(10) **For your eastern boundary you shall draw a line from Hazar-enan to Shepham.**

(11) **From Shepham the boundary shall descend to Riblah on the east side of Ain; from there the boundary shall continue downward and abut on the eastern slopes of the Sea of Chinnereth.**

(12) **The boundary shall then descend along the Jordan and terminate at the Dead Sea. That shall be your land as defined by its boundaries on all sides.**

(13) **Moses instructed the Israelites, saying: This is the land you are to receive by lot as your hereditary portion, which the Lord has commanded to be given to the nine and a half tribes.**

(14) **For the Reubenite tribe by its ancestral houses, the Gadite tribe by its ancestral houses, and the half-tribe of Manasseh have already received their portions:**

(15) **those two and a half tribes have received their portions across the Jordan, opposite Jericho, on the east, the orient side.**

(2) **Instruct the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land of Canaan:** The Land of Canaan as described here is only a portion of the Land of Israel – the part that forms its core. It is the “land of seven nations,” in which is concentrated the center of the land’s holiness. However, the intent was that this holiness would extend beyond those boundaries to the “land of the ten nations” – “from the Nile to the Euphrates” (Gen. 15:16; see also Deut. 11:24). And from there – to the entire world.

(3) **Your southern sector shall extend from the wilderness of Zin alongside Edom. Your southern boundary shall start on the east from the tip of the Dead Sea:** The southern border begins at the southern boundary of the Dead Sea and proceeds from there westward, approximately through the center of the modern-day Negev (which means, simply, “south”).

(5) **From Azmon the boundary shall turn toward the Wadi of Egypt and terminate at the Sea:** “The Wadi of Egypt” is the Wadi

El-Arish, which flows into the Mediterranean Sea some 30 km (19 mi) south of Gaza.

**(6) For the western boundary you shall have the coast of the Great Sea:** This includes the coastal region and the nearby islands.

**(7-9) This shall be your northern boundary:** Draw a line from the Great Sea to Mount Hor ... to Lebo-hamath, and let the boundary reach Zedad ... to Ziphron and ... Hazar-enan: The locations of these landmarks along the northern border are difficult to identify, and there is no consensus among the commentators about them. It is believed that the boundaries indicated here correspond to the zone of Egyptian influence that extended unto the Hittite kingdom.

**(7) Draw a line from the Great Sea to Mount Hor:** There are actually two Mount Hors – one in the south, renowned as the place where Aaron is buried, and the other in the north, in the general vicinity of modern Beirut. That is, southern Lebanon and the Litani River with its water resources are a part of Canaan, which is economically significant.

**(10-12) For your eastern boundary you shall draw a line from Hazar-enan to Shepham ... to Riblah ... and abut on the eastern slopes of the Sea of Chinnereth ... then descend along the Jordan:** The Golan Heights did not fall within the boundaries of Canaan, but they are a part of the Transjordan. Both, however, belong to the territory of the Land of Israel.

**(12) That shall be your land as defined by its boundaries on all sides:** This is the territory that is designated for settlement.

**(14) For the Reubenite tribe by its ancestral houses, the Gadite tribe by its ancestral houses, and the half-tribe of Manasseh have already received their portions:** After the Reubenites and the Gadites had expressed their readiness to fight for the lands of the other tribes as well, their initiative was deemed legitimate (see above, Num. 32).

**(15) On the east, the orient side:** In Biblical Hebrew there are two Hebrew words for “east”: *kedem*, and *mizrach*.

(In modern Hebrew only the latter is commonly used. It derives from the Hebrew root *Z-R-CH* which means “to shine” – a reference of course to the the sun rising in the east, hence also the translation here: “the orient side.” Orient too derives from the Latin verb *oriri*, “to rise” or “come forth.”)

In this verse both of those words are used together – *keidmah miz-rachah* – which might at first seem redundant. But the repetition is intended to emphasize the trend toward expansion in these inhabited lands.

### § 30.3. NEW TRIBAL LEADERSHIP FOR APPORTIONING THE TERRITORIES (34:16-29)

טו וַיִּדְבֹר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: יי אֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־יִנְחֲלוּ לָכֶם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲלֵעֹזֶר הַכֹּהֵן וַיהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נּוּן: יח וְנָשִׂיא אֶחָד נָשִׂיא אֶחָד מִמִּטָּה תִקְחוּ לַנְּחֹל אֶת־הָאָרֶץ: יט וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת הָאֲנָשִׁים לְמִטָּה יְהוּדָה כָּלֵב בֶּן־יִפְנֶה: כ וְלִמְטָה בְּנֵי שִׁמְעוֹן שְׁמוּאֵל בֶּן־עַמִּיהוּד: כא לְמִטָּה בְּנֵימֶן אֱלִידָד בֶּן־כְּסִלּוֹן: כב וְלִמְטָה בְּנֵי־דָן נָשִׂיא בֻקִי בֶן־יִגְלִי: כג לְבְנֵי יוֹסֵף לְמִטָּה בְּנֵי־מְנַשֶׁה נָשִׂיא חַנּוּיָאֵל בֶּן־אֶפְדֹּ: כד וְלִמְטָה בְּנֵי־אֶפְרַיִם נָשִׂיא קִמּוּאֵל בֶּן־שַׁפְטָן: כה וְלִמְטָה בְּנֵי־זְבוּלֹן נָשִׂיא אֱלִיֶצֶפֶן בֶּן־פְּרַזְיָד: כו וְלִמְטָה בְּנֵי־יִשְׁשָׁכָר נָשִׂיא פְּלִטְיָאֵל בֶּן־עֲזֹן: כז וְלִמְטָה בְּנֵי־אֲשֵׁר נָשִׂיא אַחִיהוּד בֶּן־שְׁלֹמִי: כח וְלִמְטָה בְּנֵי־נַפְתָּלִי נָשִׂיא פְּדַהֲאֵל בֶּן־עַמִּיהוּד: כט אֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי לַנְּחֹל אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:

(16) **The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:**

(17) **These are the names of the men through whom the land shall be apportioned for you: Eleazar the priest and Joshua son of Nun.**

(18) **And you shall also take a chieftain from each tribe through whom the land shall be apportioned.**

(19) **These are the names of the men: from the tribe of Judah: Caleb son of Jephunneh.**

(20) **From the Simeonite tribe: Samuel son of Ammihud.**

(21) **From the tribe of Benjamin: Elidad son of Chislon.**

(22) **From the Danite tribe: a chieftain, Bukki son of Jogli.**

(23) **For the descendants of Joseph: from the Manassite tribe: a chieftain, Hanniel son of Ephod;**

(24) **and from the Ephraimite tribe: a chieftain, Kemuel son of Shiptan.**

(25) **From the Zebulunite tribe: a chieftain, Elizaphan son of Parnach.**

(26) **From the Issacharite tribe: a chieftain, Paltiel son of Azzan.**

(27) **From the Asherite tribe: a chieftain, Ahihud son of Shelomi.**

(28) **From the Naphtalite tribe: a chieftain, Pedahel son of Ammihud.**

(29) **It was these whom the Lord designated to allot portions to the Israelites in the land of Canaan.**

**(16-17) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:** These are the names of the men through whom the land shall be apportioned for you: The new, future leaders are being appointed here. Thus, there is now a change of leadership for the tribes.

The men through whom the land shall be apportioned for you: Eleazar the priest and Joshua son of Nun: These two leaders represent the two key aspects of the apportionment of the land: the spiritual and the material-political, respectively.

**(18) And you shall also take a chieftain from each tribe through whom the land shall be apportioned:** The order of the tribes as they are listed here corresponds to the locations of their future allotments in the land, sequenced from south to north. Judah, Simeon and Benjamin will occupy the south; Dan, Manasseh and Ephraim – the central region; Issachar, Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali – the northern territories.

**(19-21) From the tribe of Judah: Caleb son of Jephunneh. From the Simeonite tribe:** Samuel son of Ammihud. From the tribe of Benjamin: Elidad son of Chislon: Unlike the appointees of the next seven tribes, all of whom bear the title *nasi*, “chieftain,” these first three are not given that title.

The commentators explain that a *nasi* is not a national, but only a regional, “district” leader. For Judah and Benjamin, however, that is

not sufficient. Their leaders must function at the national level, because later in history the Messiah-kings will descend from those tribes. (Moreover, the Tabernacle, and later the permanent Temple, will be located in the territory of Benjamin.)

Likewise, but conversely, the Simeonite appointee does not have the title of *nasi*, because the Simeonites are destined to lose even the regional level of leadership. The tribe of Simeon will later be dispersed throughout Judah's territory. In other words, Simeon's tribal leader does not have the title of *nasi*, because this tribe is too weak to merit even that.

Whereas, as already stated just above, the leaders of Judah and Benjamin are not called *nasi*, because those tribes have a much stronger, national significance than that term implies.

**(20, 23, 24, 26, 28) Samuel, Hannel, Kemuel, Paltiel, Pedahel:** Many of these names incorporate the Name of God – *El*. Contrast this with the names of the spies (Num. 13:4-15), where there are much fewer such names. This tells us that the new generation is more focused on forging a connection with the Almighty.

#### § 30.4. THE LEVITE CITIES (35:1-8)

א וידבר יי אל-משה בעֲרֵבֶת מוֹאָב עַל-יַרְדֵּן יְרֵחוֹ לֵאמֹר: ב צֹ' אֶת-  
 בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָתַנּוּ לָלוֹיִם מִנְחֵלֶת אַחֲזָתָם עָרִים לְשֹׁבֵת וּמִגְרָשׁ לְעָרִים  
 סְבִיבֹתֵיהֶם תִּתְּנוּ לָלוֹיִם: ג וְהָיוּ הָעָרִים לָהֶם לְשֹׁבֵת וּמִגְרָשֵׁיהֶם יִהְיוּ  
 לְבִהְמָתָם וּלְרֹכְשָׁם וּלְכָל חֵיָתָם: ד וּמִגְרָשֵׁי הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנוּ לָלוֹיִם  
 מִקִּיר הָעִיר וְחֹוֹצָה אֵלָּף אַמָּה סְבִיב: ה וּמִדֹּתָם מִחוּץ לְעִיר אֶת-פְּאֵת-  
 קִדְמָה אֶלְפִים בָּאֲמָה וְאֶת-פְּאֵת-נֹגֵב אֶלְפִים בָּאֲמָה וְאֶת-פְּאֵת-יָם |  
 אֶלְפִים בָּאֲמָה וְאֵת פְּאֵת צָפוֹן אֶלְפִים בָּאֲמָה וְהָעִיר בְּתוֹךְ זֶה יִהְיֶה  
 לָהֶם מִגְרָשֵׁי הָעָרִים: ו וְאֵת הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנוּ לָלוֹיִם אֵת שְׁשֵׁעָרֵי  
 הַמִּקְלָט אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנוּ לָגֹס שָׁמָּה הֶרְצַח וְעָלִיָּהֶם תִּתְּנוּ אַרְבָּעִים וּשְׁתַּיִם  
 עִיר: ז כָּל-הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנוּ לָלוֹיִם אַרְבָּעִים וּשְׁמֹנֶה עִיר אֶתְהוּ וְאֶת-  
 מִגְרָשֵׁיהֶן: ח וְהָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנוּ מֵאַחַזֵּת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֵת הָרֶב  
 תִּרְבּוּ וּמֵאֵת הַמְעֻט תִּמְעֻטוּ אִישׁ כְּפִי נְחֻלָּתוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִנְחֻלוּ יִתֵּן מִעָרָיו  
 לָלוֹיִם:

**(1) The Lord spoke to Moses in the steppes of Moab at the Jordan near Jericho, saying:**

**(2) Instruct the Israelite people to assign, out of the holdings apportioned to them, towns for the Levites to dwell in; you shall also assign to the Levites pasture land around their towns.**

**(3) The towns shall be theirs to dwell in, and the pasture shall be for the cattle they own and all their other beasts.**

**(4) The town pasture that you are to assign to the Levites shall extend a thousand cubits outside the town wall all around.**

**(5) You shall measure off two thousand cubits outside the town on the east side, two thousand on the south side, two thousand on the west side, and two thousand on the north side, with the town in the center. That shall be the pasture for their towns.**

**(6) The towns that you assign to the Levites shall comprise the six cities of refuge that you are to designate for a manslayer to flee to, to which you shall add forty-two towns.**

**(7) Thus the total of the towns that you assign to the Levites shall be forty-eight towns, with their pasture.**

**(8) In assigning towns from the holdings of the Israelites, take more from the larger groups and less from the smaller, so that each assigns towns to the Levites in proportion to the share it receives.**

**(2) Instruct the Israelite people to assign, out of the holdings apportioned to them, towns for the Levites to dwell in:** This is done so that the Levites, rather than being concentrated close to the Temple, will be distributed throughout the territories of all the tribes.

Dividing the forty-eight Levite cities across the twelve tribes would mean, on average, four cities per tribe. But since the territories of the tribes were not at all of uniform size, Judah actually received eight cities, Simeon received one, Naphtali received three, and the remaining nine tribes received four cities each (see Josh. 21).

**To assign, out of the holdings apportioned to them:** The Hebrew is, *ve-natenu la-leviyim* – “that they (i.e., the twelve tribes) shall give to the Levites.” It was important that the tribes themselves would perform this act of giving, so that they would realize the importance of settling the Levites among them.

**Towns for the Levites to dwell in:** Essentially, the Levites have no land that they can call their own. Their main function is to preserve the traditions and advance the people along the path of Torah. Even while living in their forty-eight cities the Levites have no sovereignty over them. The Levites live on lands that belong to their host tribes, but are made available to them for use.

Land ownership is a double-edged proposition. On the one hand, the Jewish people cannot possibly realize their mission without their land. But on the other hand, there is always a danger of become too immersed in the material, of elevating “blood and soil” to the absolute, to the point where the land devours its owner, at it were. It is therefore essential that a certain element within the Jewish people remains at a safe distance from land ownership. And that is the role of the Levites.

**You shall also assign to the Levites pasture land around their towns:** A cubit is approximately one half of a meter (or about 19.7 inches). Such a small parcel of land, extending two thousand cubits – about 1000 meters (3,281 feet) – beyond the city walls, was hardly adequate for providing sufficient food for the Levites. But it was enough to create a basic connection between the Levites and the land. Thus, they are not completely removed from the land, but neither are they bound to it.

**(4-5) The town pasture ... shall extend a thousand cubits outside the town wall all around. You shall measure off two thousand cubits outside the town:** It is not entirely clear how to reconcile these two measurements – the one thousand cubits first mentioned, and the two thousand cubits of the next verse. The commentators explain that the first thousand cubits, closer to the city, were intended for grazing of livestock; neither building nor growing produce there was permitted. But the outer thousand cubits could be used for growing fruits and vegetables.

**(6) The towns that you assign to the Levites shall comprise the six cities of refuge that you are to designate for a manslayer to flee to, to which you shall add forty-two towns:** The six cities of refuge for manslayers who kill unintentionally are elaborated in detail in the Torah section that immediately follows.

This verse is informing us firstly that the six cities of refuge are themselves counted among the forty-eight Levite cities already mentioned. And secondly, that the other forty-two Levite cities can likewise serve as cities of refuge for unintentional manslayers.

What then is the difference between the main six cities of refuge and the other forty-two? It is this: in the six primary cities of refuge the community was obliged to sustain the refugees by providing them with living conditions. But in the remaining forty-two cities the community had no such responsibility.

And why were the Levite cities chosen to be cities of refuge, rather than regular cities that belonged to the twelve tribes? This has to do with the Levites' educational function. By living among Levites, a tribe fully dedicated to communication with the Almighty, an unintentional killer could find correction. (Although the killing happened unintentionally, correction is needed, because there was negligence involved, as we shall soon explain in great detail.)

## § 31. THE CITIES OF REFUGE

### § 31.1. DESIGNATING THE CITIES OF REFUGE (35:9-15)

ט וַיִּדְבֹר יי אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: יִדְבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם  
כִּי אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן אֶרְצָה כְּנָעַן: יֵא וְהִקְרִיתֶם לָכֶם עָרִים  
עָרֵי מִקְלָט תִּהְיֶינָה לָכֶם וְגַם שְׂמָה לָצַח מִכַּה־נֶפֶשׁ בְּשׁוּגָה: יב וְהָיוּ  
לָכֶם הָעָרִים לְמִקְלָט מִגָּאֹל וְלֹא יָמוּת הַרְצֹחַ עַד־עֲמִדוֹ לִפְנֵי הָעֵדָה  
לְמִשְׁפָּט: יג וְהָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנוּ שֵׁשׁ־עָרֵי מִקְלָט תִּהְיֶינָה לָכֶם: יד אֵת |  
שְׁלֹשׁ הָעָרִים תִּתְּנוּ מֵעֵבֶר לַיַּרְדֵּן וְאֵת שְׁלֹשׁ הָעָרִים תִּתְּנוּ בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן  
עָרֵי מִקְלָט תִּהְיֶינָה: טו לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִגֵּר וְלִתּוֹשֵׁב בְּתוֹכְכֶם תִּהְיֶינָה  
שֵׁשׁ־הָעָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְמִקְלָט לְנוֹס שְׂמָה כָּל־מִכַּה־נֶפֶשׁ בְּשׁוּגָה:

(9) **The Lord spoke further to Moses:**

**(10) Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan,**

**(11) you shall provide yourselves with places to serve you as cities of refuge to which a manslayer who has killed a person unintentionally may flee.**

**(12) The cities shall serve you as a refuge from the avenger, so that the manslayer may not die unless he has stood trial before the assembly.**

**(13) The towns that you thus assign shall be six cities of refuge in all.**

**(14) Three cities shall be designated beyond the Jordan, and the other three shall be designated in the land of Canaan: they shall serve as cities of refuge.**

**(15) These six cities shall serve the Israelites and the resident aliens among them for refuge, so that anyone who kills a person unintentionally may flee there.**

**(11) A manslayer who has killed a person unintentionally:** “Unintentional” killing is punishable by exile only if it happened through negligence. But if the killing occurred as a result of actions of the victim, or for random reasons completely beyond anyone’s control, exile to a city of refuge does not apply.

It should also be noted that a key aspect of exile to a city of refuge for unintentional manslaying is to grant protection to the killer himself from a blood-avenger – that is, a person – most typically a close relative of the victim – who seeks to avenge the killing (see Num. 35: 25-28).

There are three grades of unintentional killing in Jewish law:

(i) If a person conducted himself in gross violation of safety rules, or did something unacceptable – driving while intoxicated, for example – that led to the death of the victim, then for the purpose of exile to a city of refuge the killing is deemed equivalent to deliberate murder. In this case, a city of refuge will not save the perpetrator.

(ii) If a person complied with all required rules and regulations, but caused a death by being insufficiently attentive (as in the most typical automobile accidents, for example) this is categorized as manslaughter. The person who committed it may, and must, seek protection by fleeing to a city of refuge.

(iii) If the death of the victim was completely unrelated to anything the manslayer did or did not do, such that there was no negligence whatsoever involved, then there is no need for the killer to flee to a city of refuge. (The assumption is that the relatives of the victim would acknowledge this mitigating circumstance, and not seek to avenge the death of their family member in such a case.)

The Talmud, as an example of this third of the three categories of unintentional manslaying, cites the case of a person lifted into the air by a cyclone, who in falling back to earth crashes down upon the victim, causing his death.

A more realistic, contemporary example would be a driver who was observing the speed limit and complying with all other expected precautions, when the victim suddenly ran out into the road, and the driver could not possibly have decelerated in time to avoid the fatal accident.

Thus, in deciding whether a situation requires the killer to flee to a city of refuge, “negligent homicide” (rather than “manslaughter”) is the term that should be applied for determining whether the necessary criteria have been met.

The cities of refuge were intended not for persons who were guilty of crimes involving malicious intent, but only for those who had committed some act of negligence toward a fellow citizen that resulted in tragedy. The atmosphere of remorse that reigned in such cities naturally contributed to the rehabilitation of the persons who fled there, by re-educating them to exercise greater caution and attentiveness.

**(12) The cities shall serve you as a refuge from the avenger, so that the manslayer may not die unless he has stood trial before the assembly:** As already explained, the words “so that the manslayer may not die unless he has stood trial” mean that we need to prevent his death at the hand of someone seeking to avenge the killing.

The standard procedure was as follows. Any person who had committed a murder, or any act leading to the death of another human being, regardless of the circumstances, would immediately flee to a city of refuge. The court system would then establish, based on the merits of the case, whether or not the murder was premeditated, and whether conditions had been met to allow (or require) the manslayer to remain in the city of refuge.

**(13) The towns that you thus assign shall be six cities of refuge in all:** As also already noted, six of the forty-eight Levite cities were designated as primary cities of refuge – regional centers in which the community tended to the needs of the refugees by providing them with

housing. And the remaining forty-two Levite cities were likewise used as local shelters.

Of the six cities, Shechem was centrally located in the territory of the tribe of Joseph, Shechem being the geographical center of the Canaan region of the Land of Israel. In the north of Canaan, it was Kadesh in the tribe of Naphtali (west of the Chinnereth), and in the south – Hebron in the tribe of Judah. In the Transjordan there was Bezer in the territory of Reuben, Ramoth in Gad’s territory, and Golan in Manasseh’s. (See Deut. 4:43 and Josh. 20:7-9.)

**(14) Three cities shall be designated beyond the Jordan, and the other three shall be designated in the land of Canaan:** It is important to note that there were three cities of refuge in Canaan and three more in the Transjordan region, although nine and a half tribes live in Canaan, and only two and a half in the much larger Jordan region. Thus, both the population density and the absolute population numbers of the Transjordan were much lower than those of the Canaan region. Why, then, did the Transjordan require a full half of all the cities of refuge?

We might be tempted to answer that the vast territories of the Transjordan required so many cities of refuge in order to assure that a killer seeing protection would not be so far from any such city that a blood-avenger might overtake him before he could arrive there. But that cannot be the reason, seeing that (as already mentioned) there were actually forty-eight cities of refuge, and not only six.

Rather, Tradition offers a different explanation. It seems that manslaughter was statistically far more prevalent in the Transjordan than in the Canaan region. The few tribes that lived east of the Jordan were much further removed from the Temple and the mindset of holiness that it inspired, and they therefore tended to put less value on human life and to be more negligent toward their fellow Jews. Accordingly, the relative number of unintentional killings in the Transjordan was higher, and three primary cities of refuge – a full half of the total – were needed there.

**(15) These six cities shall serve the Israelites and the resident aliens among them for refuge, so that anyone who kills a person unintentionally may flee there:** For the matter of finding protection,

and seeking correction, in a city of refuge, all the inhabitants of the land – even its resident aliens – have exactly the same rights and obligations as full citizens, “the Israelites.”

### § 31.2. THE CRITERIA FOR INTENTIONAL AND UNINTENTIONAL KILLING (35:16-24)

טז וְאִם־בְּכֵלִי בְרִזָּל | הִכְהוּ וַיָּמָת רֹצֵחַ הוּא מוֹת יוֹמֵת הָרֹצֵחַ: יז וְאִם  
בְּאֶבֶן יָד אֲשֶׁר־יָמוּת בָּהּ הִכְהוּ וַיָּמָת רֹצֵחַ הוּא מוֹת יוֹמֵת  
הָרֹצֵחַ: יח אִוּ בְּכֵלִי עֵץ־יָד אֲשֶׁר־יָמוּת בּוֹ הִכְהוּ וַיָּמָת רֹצֵחַ הוּא  
מוֹת יוֹמֵת הָרֹצֵחַ: יט גָּאֵל הַדָּם הוּא יָמִית אֶת־הָרֹצֵחַ בְּפָגְעוֹ־בּוֹ הוּא  
יִמְתְּנוּ: כ וְאִם־בְּשִׁנְאָה יִהְדָּפְנוּ אוֹ־הַשְּׁלִיךְ עָלָיו בְּצַדִּיהָ וַיָּמָת: כא אִוּ  
בְּאִיבָה הִכְהוּ בִּידוֹ וַיָּמָת מוֹת־יוֹמֵת הַמִּכָּה רֹצֵחַ הוּא גָּאֵל הַדָּם יָמִית  
אֶת־הָרֹצֵחַ בְּפָגְעוֹ־בּוֹ: כב וְאִם־בְּפֶתַע בְּלֹא־אִיבָה הִדְפּוֹ אוֹ־הַשְּׁלִיךְ  
עָלָיו כָּל־כֵּלִי בְּלֹא צַדִּיהָ: כג אִוּ בְּכֵל־אֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר־יָמוּת בָּהּ בְּלֹא רְאוֹת  
וַיַּפֵּל עָלָיו וַיָּמָת וְהוּא לֹא־אוֹיֵב לוֹ וְלֹא מִבְּקֶשׁ רָעָתוֹ: כד וְשִׁפְטוֹ הָעֵדָה  
בֵּין הַמִּכָּה וּבֵין גָּאֵל הַדָּם עַל הַמְּשַׁפְּטִים הָאֵלֶּה:

(16) **Anyone, however, who strikes another with an iron object so that death results is a murderer; the murderer must be put to death.**

(17) **If he struck him with a stone tool that could cause death, and death resulted, he is a murderer; the murderer must be put to death.**

(18) **Similarly, if the object with which he struck him was a wooden tool that could cause death, and death resulted, he is a murderer; the murderer must be put to death.**

(19) **The blood-avenger himself shall put the murderer to death; it is he who shall put him to death upon encounter.**

(20) **So, too, if he pushed him in hate or hurled something at him on purpose and death re-sulted,**

(21) **or if he struck him with his hand in enmity and death re-sulted, the assailant shall be put to death; he is a murderer. The blood-avenger shall put the murderer to death upon encounter.**

(22) **But if he pushed him without malice aforethought or hurled any object at him unintentionally,**

(23) **or inadvertently dropped upon him any deadly object of stone, and death resulted – though he was not an enemy of his and did not seek his harm –**

(24) **in such cases the assembly shall decide between the slayer and the blood-avenger.**

**(16) Anyone, however, who strikes another with an iron object:** According to Jewish tradition, three criteria are used to determine whether a killing can be prosecuted as murder (i.e., the killing can be deemed fully intentional):

(i) The instrument involved was such as would normally cause the death of the victim.

(ii) Enmity between the assailant and the victim was known to have existed (that is, a motive can be identified).

(iii) It was known in advance that a murder was being contemplated, and only moments before he committed the heinous crime the prospective criminal was duly and officially warned against executing such a plan.

The first two of those three criteria are stated explicitly here in the Torah, while the third is derived by Tradition from the incident of the man who was gathering wood on the Sabbath day (Num. 15:33). That last requirement is of course the most difficult to meet, and in practice is rarely satisfied.

Tradition reports that the Sanhedrin – the supreme Jewish religious court – weighed the possibility of a murder conviction primarily on the basis of the third criterion. But the state judiciary system, and, more generally, the secular-political authorities (which means, essentially, the tribal leaders or judges) were guided more by the first two criteria – the nature of the murder weapon and known hostility between the parties. Those courts had the authority to make their own determination, on a case-by-case basis, as to what evidence of premeditated murder was considered sufficient for securing a conviction.

**(16-17) Anyone, however, who strikes another with an iron object so that death results ... If he struck him with a stone tool that could cause death, and death resulted ... Similarly, if the object with which he struck him was a wooden tool that could cause death, and death resulted:** The literal meaning of the Hebrew is, “If he smote him with a stone in the hand ... if he smote him with a weapon of wood in the hand.”

With regard to a stone or wooden weapon, the minimum size of the object used for killing is specified – “the size of the hand, because that is the size that kills”. Any stone or wooden weapon of that size or larger – “a tool that could cause death” – creates a presumption of murderous intent. But no such size restriction is placed on iron weapons, because even a small iron object can easily cause death.

**(16) [He] is a murderer; the murderer must be put to death:** This refrain is repeated several times in these verses, to emphasize that if the perpetrator is truly guilty, he must not be allowed to escape punishment.

**(19) The blood-avenger:** *Go'el ha-dam*, literally, “the redeemer of the blood.” This term means “the avenger of the blood,” or, yet more precisely, “the redeemer of the bloodshed,” for he cleanses the earth of crime. See below (Num. 35:33): “You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land.” (Cf. also Gen. 4:10, where, after Cain murders his brother Abel, God says to him: “What have you done? Hark, your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground!”)

However, the “blood” in the term “redeemer of the blood,” rather than referring to the bloodshed of the killing, might be referring to the simple fact that that “redeemer of the blood” was usually a blood relative of the victim.

**The blood-avenger himself shall put the murderer to death; it is he who shall put him to death upon encounter:** The Torah here makes it abundantly clear that negligence with regard to another person’s life is severely punishable, and that in the event of a death so caused, the victim’s relatives have a right to avenge the killing. Bearing this in mind, every citizen is expected to give serious consideration to the consequences of his actions, and to be especially attentive to the safety and well-being of others.

§ 31.3. PROCEDURES IN THE CASE OF UNINTENTIONAL  
KILLING (35:25-29)

כה והֵצִילוּ הָעֵדָה אֶת־הַרֹצֵחַ מִיַּד גֹּאֵל הַדָּם וְהֵשִׁיבוּ אֹתוֹ הָעֵדָה אֶל־  
עִיר מִקְלָטוֹ אֲשֶׁר־נָס שָׁמָּה וַיֵּשֶׁב בָּהּ עַד־מוֹת הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדֹל אֲשֶׁר־  
מָשַׁח אֹתוֹ בְּשֶׁמֶן הַקֹּדֶשׁ: כו וְאִם־יֵצֵא יֵצֵא הַרֹצֵחַ אֶת־גְּבוּל עִיר  
מִקְלָטוֹ אֲשֶׁר יָנוּס שָׁמָּה: כז וּמֵצֵא אֹתוֹ גֹּאֵל הַדָּם מִחוּץ לְגְבוּל עִיר  
מִקְלָטוֹ וְרֹצַח גֹּאֵל הַדָּם אֶת־הַרֹצֵחַ אִין לֹ דָם: כח כִּי בָעִיר מִקְלָטוֹ יֵשֶׁב  
עַד־מוֹת הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדֹל וְאַחֲרֵי מוֹת הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדֹל יָשׁוּב הַרֹצֵחַ אֶל־אָרֶץ  
אֲחֻזָּתוֹ: כט וְהָיוּ אֵלֶּה לָכֶם לְחֻקֹּת מִשְׁפָּט לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם בְּכֹל מוֹשְׁבֹתֵיכֶם:

(25) The assembly shall protect the manslayer from the blood-avenger, and the assembly shall restore him to the city of refuge to which he fled, and there he shall remain until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the sacred oil.

(26) But if the manslayer ever goes outside the limits of the city of refuge to which he has fled,

(27) and the blood-avenger comes upon him outside the limits of his city of refuge, and the blood-avenger kills the manslayer, there is no bloodguilt on his account.

(28) For he must remain inside his city of refuge until the death of the high priest; after the death of the high priest, the manslayer may return to his land holding.

(29) Such shall be your law of procedure throughout the ages in all your settlements.

**(25) The assembly shall restore him to the city of refuge ... and there he shall remain until the death of the high priest:** Since the national religious system (the *kohanim* and the Levites, headed by the *kohen gadol*, the “high priest”) is responsible for educating the people, and especially for cultivating in every Jew a sense of responsibility for the lives of his neighbors, the same system is also deemed ultimately responsible for any instance of negligent homicide. Thus, the state authority is responsible for combating murder, and the religious authorities are responsible for countering unintentional killings.

**(25) And there he shall remain until the death of the high priest:** According to the Midrash, because the end of the period of exile was determined, as the verse prescribes here, by the death of the high priest, the unintentional manslayers and their families, wishing for them to return home as soon as possible, would often pray that the high priest would die as soon as possible. Thus, any unintentional killing created for the high priest a “moral punishment” for his dereliction of duty in educating the people.

**(25) The high priest who was anointed with the sacred oil:** This means the high priest who held that position simultaneously “with him”; that is, at the time the killer committed the killing and stood trial for it.

A special olive oil was used for anointing the high priest, symbolizing his initiation into that office.

**(26-27) But if the manslayer ever goes outside the limits of the city of refuge to which he has fled, and the blood-avenger comes upon him outside the limits of his city of refuge, and the blood-avenger kills the manslayer, there is no bloodguilt on his account:** Conventionally, the purpose of the cities of refuge is seen as protecting manslayers from the blood-avengers. But according to the approach we have been following in this commentary, the situation is somewhat in reverse – i.e., the purpose of the cities of refuge is to rehabilitate the killers. And the function of the blood-avengers consists, in particular, in assuring that manslayers will not leave the cities of refuge.

#### § 31.4. PUNISHMENT FOR MURDER (35:30-34)

לְכַל־מִכְה־נֶפֶשׁ לְפִי עֵדִים יִרְצַח אֶת־הָרֹצֵחַ וְעַד אַחַד לֹא־יַעֲנֶה  
 בְּנֶפֶשׁ לְמוֹת: לֹא וְלֹא־תִקְחוּ כֹפֶר לְנֶפֶשׁ רֹצֵחַ אֲשֶׁר־הוּא רָשָׁע לְמוֹת  
 בְּיָמוֹת יוֹמָת: לֹב וְלֹא־תִקְחוּ כֹפֶר לְנוֹס אֶל־עִיר מִקְלוֹטוֹ לְשׁוּב לְשִׁבְתָּ  
 בְּאֶרֶץ עַד־מוֹת הַכֹּהֵן: לֹג וְלֹא־תַחַנְּפוּ אֶת־הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם בָּהּ כִּי  
 הַדִּם הוּא יַחַנְּיף אֶת־הָאֶרֶץ וְלֹא־יִכְפֹּר לַדָּם אֲשֶׁר שָׁפַדְתֶּם  
 כִּי־אִם בְּדָם שָׁפְכוּ: לֹד וְלֹא תִטְמֵא אֶת־הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם יֹשְׁבִים בָּהּ

אֲשֶׁר אָנִי שֹׂכֵן בְּתוֹכָהּ כִּי אֲנִי יְיָ שֹׂכֵן בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

(30) If anyone kills a person, the manslayer may be executed only on the evidence of witnesses; the testimony of a single witness against a person shall not suffice for a sentence of death.

(31) You may not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of a capital crime; he must be put to death.

(32) Nor may you accept ransom in lieu of flight to a city of refuge, enabling one to return to live on his land before the death of the priest.

(33) You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it.

(34) You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I Myself abide, for I the Lord abide among the Israelite people.

(30) If anyone kills a person, the manslayer may be executed only on the evidence of witnesses; the testimony of a single witness against a person shall not suffice for a sentence of death: As already mentioned, even the Sanhedrin (the highest Jewish ecclesiastical court) cannot condemn a murderer to death without the reliable testimony of at least two witnesses. But the state judiciary is empowered to make its own determination as to the sufficiency of the available evidence, and it can pronounce a verdict and impose a sentence even on the basis of the testimony of a single witness.

(31-33) You may not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of a capital crime; he must be put to death. Nor may you accept ransom in lieu of flight to a city of refuge, enabling one to return to live on his land before the death of the priest ... for blood pollutes the land, and the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it: In the case of premeditated killing (i.e., murder), that expiation for the land is achieved through the execution of the murderer, which is the straightforward meaning of this verse.

But for unintentional killings, no such execution takes place. We can, however, suggest a less obvious, alternate interpretation for the words of this verse – “the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it” – namely, that that statement is in fact speaking of unintentional killing as well, and “the blood of him that shed it” refers to the death of the high priest. His death, which can be seen as a symbolic “execution,” brings expiation for the bloodshed that is imputed to him, the high priest, for having failed to inculcate in society an attitude of respect and reverence toward the lives of all its members.

A very similar idea can be seen in the law of the corpse found outside the limits of any city, who died at the hand of an unknown assailant: “If, in the land that the Lord your God is assigning you to possess, someone slain is found lying in the open, the identity of the slayer not being known...” (Deut. 21:1). Since no one knows who the murderer is, the Torah goes on to prescribe a fairly elaborate procedure for achieving atonement for the tragedy. And at the conclusion of that procedure, the Torah says:

“Then all the elders of the town nearest to the corpse shall wash their hands ... in the wadi. And they shall make this declaration: ‘Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. Absolve, O Lord, Your people Israel whom You redeemed, and do not let guilt for the blood of the innocent remain among Your people Israel.’ And they will be absolved of bloodguilt” (Deut. 21:6-8).

The Talmud (Mishnah, Sotah 9:6) asks:

“What is the meaning of that declaration of the elders, ‘Our hands did not shed this blood...’? Did it ever really occur to us that the elders of the Jewish court are murderers, that they must counter that suspicion with such a declaration?! Rather, the elders mean to declare: ‘The victim did not come to us, and then we let him take his leave without food, or allowed him to depart without proper accompaniment along the road for his safety.’”

Clearly, the Mishnah is saying that if, conversely, the elders of the court cannot truthfully make that declaration of having secured the

victim's safety, then the elders are seen, as it were, as nothing less than complicit in the murder!

Thus we see there, as here in the case of the high priest, that the Jewish leadership is charged with being aggressively proactive in preventing the shedding of innocent blood. If by their actions that leadership could have averted a tragedy, but they failed to do so, they are themselves held accountable.

**(34) You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I Myself abide, for I the Lord abide among the Israelite people:** The actual prohibition of murder, and the fact that the punishment for committing a murder is the death penalty, have already been mentioned a number of times in the Torah – even as early as the book of Genesis (9:6), where God told Noah immediately after the flood: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, By man shall his blood be shed; For in His image Did God make man.”

But the added dimension here is the emphasis on following through with that punishment when it has been imposed, and on the principle that pardoning murderers or condoning murder defiles the land. The Jewish people especially need to be told this, because it is in their nature to be merciful – even to show excessive mercy to their enemies, and even to forgive murderers. The Torah therefore has to emphasize that such “mercy” will never lead to anything good.

## § 32. THE CONCLUSION OF THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

### § 32.1. THE PROBLEM OF DAUGHTERS' INHERITANCE IN THE LAND (36:1-4)

א וַיִּקְרְבוּ רֹאשֵׁי הָאֲבוֹת לְמִשְׁפַּחַת בְּנֵי־גִלְעָד בְּזֶמְכִיר בֶּן־מְנַשֶּׁה מִמִּשְׁפַּחַת בְּנֵי יוֹסֵף וַיִּדְבְּרוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וּלְפָנֵי הַנְּשָׂאִים רֹאשֵׁי אֲבוֹת לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ב וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶת־אֲדֹנָי צְוֵה יְיָ לָתֵת אֶת־הָאָרֶץ בְּנַחֲלָהּ בְּגֹזֶרֶל לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲדֹנָי צְוֵה בְיָי לָתֵת אֶת־נַחֲלַת צִלְפַּחַד אַחֵינוּ לְבָנֹתָיו: ג וְהָיוּ לְאֶחָד מִבְּנֵי שְׁבֹטֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְנָשִׁים וְנִגְרָעָה נַחֲלָתָן מִנַּחֲלַת אֲבֹתֵינוּ וְנוֹסֵף עַל נַחֲלַת הַמַּטֵּה אֲשֶׁר תִּהְיֶינָה לָהֶם וּמִגֶּזֶרֶל נַחֲלָתָנוּ יִגְרָע: ד וְאִם־יִהְיֶה הַיָּבֵל לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנוֹסְפָה נַחֲלָתָן עַל נַחֲלַת הַמַּטֵּה אֲשֶׁר תִּהְיֶינָה לָהֶם וּמִנַּחֲלַת מַטֵּה אֲבֹתֵינוּ יִגְרַע נַחֲלָתָנוּ:

(36:1) The family heads in the clan of the descendants of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh, one of the Josephite clans, came forward and appealed to Moses and the chieftains, family heads of the Israelites.

(2) They said, "The Lord commanded my lord to assign the land to the Israelites as shares by lot, and my lord was further commanded by the Lord to assign the share of our kinsman Zelophehad to his daughters.

(3) Now, if they marry persons from another Israelite tribe, their share will be cut off from our ancestral portion and be

**added to the portion of the tribe into which they marry; thus our allotted portion will be diminished.**

**(4) And even when the Israelites observe the jubilee, their share will be added to that of the tribe into which they marry, and their share will be cut off from the ancestral portion of our tribe.”**

**(1) The family heads in the clan of the descendants of Gilead ... came forward:** The incident of the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad is divided into two sections:

- (i) The request of the daughters to inherit their father’s portion of the land (as already told in Num. 27:1 ff.).
- (ii) The request of the tribal heads of Manasseh that that land should not leave the tribe’s possession (as told in this final chapter of the book of Numbers, which begins here).

The reason for this division is to emphasize that the story is coming to teach us two separate ideas, namely: that in the religious-spiritual realm both the individual and society are equally important. The request of Zelophehad’s daughters expresses concern for the rights and needs of the individual, while the request of the tribal heads of Manasseh speaks of the rights and needs of society. The Almighty deemed both requests legitimate, thereby demonstrating to the people that the needs of the individual and the needs of society should be addressed together, with no neglect of either one.

**Son of Machir son of Manasseh, one of the Josephite clans:** By now we are quite familiar with the lineage of the daughters of Zelophehad. Why does the Torah feel it is necessary to spell it out yet again?

The story of Zelophehad’s daughters, as already noted, is about Joseph’s “correction,” and the lineage is therefore repeated here, even if it does not tell us anything new. “Correcting” Joseph means transforming his original aspirations for land development into a desire for land development *in Israel*. This parallels the transition from Joseph himself to the category of “the Messiah, son (i.e., descendant) of Joseph.”<sup>82</sup>

<sup>82</sup> See *Bible Dynamics* on Gen. 50:25.

**(3) Their share will be cut off from our ancestral portion and be added to the portion of the tribe into which they marry:**

This is because the tribe to which a person belongs is determined by his paternal line.

**Thus our allotted portion will be diminished:** These words are usually understood as reflecting a negative motivation on the part of the tribal heads. The concern that they express demonstrates that the sense of connection within each tribe surpassed the sense of belonging to the nation as a whole, and this resulted in tension and even hostility between the tribes. (In the era of the Judges it led even to outright war.)

The Almighty is therefore now “compelled” to promulgate a new law that restricts the marriage of daughters who inherit land: they must marry members of their own tribe exclusively. This law will be rescinded only much later, at the end of the era of the Judges and closer to the establishment of the Jewish monarchy, when the sense of the unity of the entire people finally becomes dominant.

However, there is also a positive, more noble motivation behind the request of the tribal heads. The influence of each individual tribe and its contribution to the mosaic of the Jewish people depended very significantly on the land they occupied. The desire not to forfeit that influence was an important factor in the nation’s development.

**(4) And even when the Israelites observe the jubilee:** At the *Yovel*, the “jubilee,” which occurs every fiftieth year, all lands that have been transferred through sale since the previous *Yovel* revert to their original owners who came into possession of those lands by inheritance. “In this year of jubilee, each of you shall return to his holding” (Lev. 25:8).

**Their share will be added to that of the tribe into which they marry, and their share will be cut off from the ancestral portion of our tribe”:** Even in the *Yovel* year the daughters’ share would not be restored to their tribe, Manasseh, because it would have already passed to another tribe through inheritance, not through sale.

§ 32.2. RESTRICTIONS ON THE MARRIAGE OF DAUGHTERS WHO INHERIT LAND (36:5-12)

ה וַיִּצַו מֹשֶׁה אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל־פִּי יי לֵאמֹר בֵּן מִטָּה בְּנֵי־יוֹסֵף  
 דְּבָרִים: וַזֶּה הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יי לְבָנוֹת צֶלְפַּחַד לֵאמֹר לְטוֹב בְּעֵינֵיהֶם  
 תְּהִינָה לְנָשִׁים אֵדָּ לְמִשְׁפַּחַת מִטָּה אֲבֵיהֶם תְּהִינָה לְנָשִׁים: ז וְלֹא־  
 תִּסָּב נַחֲלָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּטָּה אֶל־מִטָּה כִּי אִישׁ בְּנַחֲלַת מִטָּה אֲבֹתָיו  
 יִדְבְּקוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ח וְכֹל־בֵּית יִרְשֶׁת נַחֲלָה מִמִּטּוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאַחַד  
 מִמִּשְׁפַּחַת מִטָּה אֲבֵיהֶם תְּהִיָּה לְאִשָּׁה לְמַעַן יִירָשׁוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ  
 נַחֲלַת אֲבֹתָיו: ט וְלֹא־תִסָּב נַחֲלָה מִמִּטָּה לְמִטָּה אַחֵר כִּי־אִישׁ בְּנַחֲלָתוֹ  
 יִדְבְּקוּ מִטּוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: י כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי אֶת־מֹשֶׁה בֵּן עָשׂוֹ בָּנוֹת  
 צֶלְפַּחַד: יא וְתִהְיֶינָה מַחֲלָה תְרִצָּה וְחֹגְלָה וּמִלְכָּה וְנֹעָה בָּנוֹת צֶלְפַּחַד  
 לְבְנֵי דָדֵיהֶן לְנָשִׁים: יב מִמִּשְׁפַּחַת בְּנֵי־מְנַשֶּׁה בְּזִיּוֹסֵף הָיוּ לְנָשִׁים וְתִהְיֶי  
 נַחֲלָתָן עַל־מִטָּה מִשְׁפַּחַת אֲבֵיהֶן:

(5) So Moses, at the Lord's bidding, instructed the Israelites, saying: "The plea of the Josephite tribe is just.

(6) This is what the Lord has commanded concerning the daughters of Zelophehad: They may marry anyone they wish, provided they marry into a clan of their father's tribe.

(7) No inheritance of the Israelites may pass over from one tribe to another, but the Israelites must remain bound each to the ancestral portion of his tribe.

(8) Every daughter among the Israelite tribes who inherits a share must marry someone from a clan of her father's tribe, in order that every Israelite may keep his ancestral share.

(9) Thus no inheritance shall pass over from one tribe to another, but the Israelite tribes shall remain bound each to its portion."

(10) The daughters of Zelophehad did as the Lord had commanded Moses:

(11) Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Noah, Zelophehad's daughters, were married to sons of their uncles,

**(12) marrying into clans of descendants of Manasseh son of Joseph; and so their share remained in the tribe of their father's clan.**

**(5) So Moses, at the Lord's bidding, instructed the Israelites, saying: "The plea of the Josephite tribe is just:** The connection of the Manasseh tribe's initiative with Joseph, as noted above, is emphasized here again.

**(6) This is what the Lord has commanded concerning the daughters of Zelophehad:** They may marry anyone they wish: It has always been a fundamental principle of Jewish tradition and law that a girl's family (or other would-be influencers) cannot impose on her their choice of a husband. She must always be free to make that decision entirely on her own. (See Gen. 24:57-58, and the *Bible Dynamics* commentary there.)

**(6) Provided they marry into a clan of their father's tribe:** However, there is a restriction in this case. The daughters of Zelophehad may marry only men of their own tribe, Manasseh.

**(7) No inheritance of the Israelites may pass over from one tribe to another:** But even that restriction is associated only with the inheritance of the land. Thus, having made their demand to inherit, the daughters of Zelophehad have effectively imposed this restriction upon themselves.

**(7) But the Israelites must remain bound each to the ancestral portion of his tribe:** The Hebrew verb *D-B-K*, "to stick, cleave, be (or become) attached," occurs in the Tanakh only in descriptions of interpersonal relationships – e.g., between husband and wife, Naomi and Ruth, man and God. This is the only place where that verb is used to describe the Jewish people's connection of to the Land of Israel. For as we know, that connection has the character of a "marriage" between the people and the land.

**(8) In order that every Israelite may keep his ancestral share:** Preserving the lines of inheritance was initially important for reinforcing the people's motivation to fight for the land. Later, it will facilitate the correct development of various aspects of life in the Land of Israel, since each tribe has characteristics that are unique to it alone.

**Every daughter among the Israelite tribes who inherits a share must marry someone from a clan of her father's tribe:** According to the Oral Torah, this prohibition was Torah law only at the time of the conquest of the land and its apportionment among the tribes. For some time thereafter, and until the tribes settled into their territories, this law was still preserved as a tradition – until the end of the era of the Judges, when the prohibition was finally lifted, giving rise to the celebration of *Tu Be-Av*, the “Fifteenth of Av.”

That annual celebration continued to be observed with great rejoicing even through the eras of both Temples and into the Talmudic period (and to some extent even down to our own times), while also accumulating other modes of significance along the way. According to the Mishnah (Ta'anit 4:8), no other day in the Jewish calendar, with the sole exception of Yom Kippur, could compete with the Fifteenth of Av for the sheer joy of the occasion – which is no small achievement for a holiday that never even had a real name, and to this very day is still known only by the date on which it falls: “the Fifteenth of Av.”

**(11) Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Noah, Zelophehad's daughters, were married to sons of their uncles:** The only requirement was that the daughters of Zelophehad would marry members of their tribe, Manasseh. But they take it even a step further, and marry their cousins. Because they want their land to remain not only within the Manasseh tribe, but even within their own paternal clan. This demonstrates that the sense of belonging to a particular clan was still very strong here – at least as strong as the sense of belonging to one's tribe.

**(11) Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Noah:** We noted earlier that throughout the episode of the daughters of Zelophehad their names are repeated several times, but not always in the same order. The Midrash explains that because they sought to immortalize their father's name – “Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son!” (Num. 27:4) – their own names were therefore also preserved. Here, at their marriage, they are listed in the order of seniority, whereas earlier, in their appeal to the community, they were enumerated according to their levels of wisdom. Be that as it may, the

fact that their names are repeated again and again is an indicator of their special importance as unique personalities.

### § 32.3. THE COVENANT ON THE STEPPES OF MOAB (36:13)

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הַמִּצְוֹת וְהַמְשָׁפְטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְיָ בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
בְּעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב עַל יַרְדֵּן יֶרִיחוֹ:

**(13) These are the commandments and regulations that the Lord enjoined upon the Israelites, through Moses, on the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho.**

We have already noted that the final set of commandments received by the Israelites at the conclusion of their wilderness journey, and as they stand on the very threshold of entry into the Land of Israel, is called “the Covenant on the steppes of Moab.” This covenant, which is spread over two books, Numbers and Deuteronomy, is a preparation for the conquest of the land.

The first part of this covenant ends here, as does the book of Numbers, the fourth of the five books of the Torah. The second part of the covenant occupies the bulk of the next and final book of the Torah, Deuteronomy. In our commentary there we will consider this covenant in greater detail.







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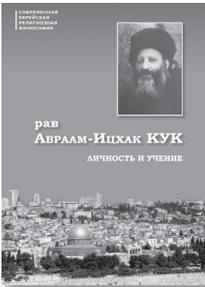
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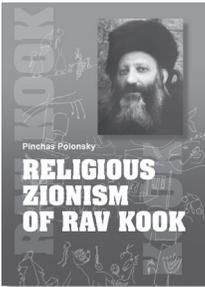


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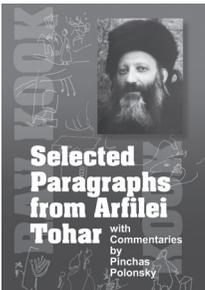
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*Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, Founding President, CLAL: National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, Founding President, Jewish Life Network*

