

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Bamidbar

A Study in Rashi – Counting the Jewish People

BACKGROUND: RASHI'S OPENING COMMENT AND SOME QUESTIONS

Chumash Bamidbar opens with a command from Hashem to Moshe to count the Jewish people, the details of which are discussed in the ensuing fifty verses. Rashi explains the meaning behind Hashem counting the Jewish people:¹

Due to their beloved nature before [Hashem], He counts them constantly: When they left Egypt, He counted them; when [some of their number] fell during the episode of the Egel, He counted them to ascertain how many were left; and when He came to have His Divine presence reside among them, He counted them – on the first of Nisan the Mishkan was set up and on the first of Iyar He counted them.

This comment of Rashi seems relatively straightforward. However, let us probe deeper into this matter, beginning with raising a few questions:

1. Rashi generally does not comment on matters of a thematic or philosophical nature per se. Rashi's goal in his commentary is set forth in his own words already in Parshas Bereishis:² "I have come only to [explain] the simple meaning of the verse." Why, then, does Rashi see fit to explain the *concept* of Hashem counting the Jewish people if the *verses* describing the count are themselves in order?
2. Although, as Rashi himself mentions, the Jewish people had been counted on a number of occasions prior to Chumash Bamidbar, nevertheless, Rashi never commented on this phenomenon at any of those times. Why did he choose to comment now?
3. The study of any comment of Rashi begins by noting, not only what Rashi says, but also the words of the verse which he quotes as his header – for they are the words he is commenting on. In our case, the header for Rashi's comment are the words in verse one: "Hashem spoke... in the wilderness of Sinai on the first of the month." This is a most perplexing situation. The actual instruction to count the people is not mentioned until verse two, while the opening verse is simply relating the "technical information" of the place and time when this occurred. Why does Rashi place his comment here? Having let so many instances of Hashem counting the people go without any comment whatsoever, when Rashi finally does say something, he does so even before the Torah mentions it!

1 1:1 s.v. *va'yedaber*.

2 3:8 s.v. *va'yishmeu*.

This is most intriguing situation. Indeed, Rashi's comment suddenly no longer seems quite as simple as it did a few moments ago.³

TUCKED AWAY: CHAPTER NINE AND THE PESACH OFFERING

The commentators explain that the key to understanding Rashi's opening comment lies in another comment of his later on in our Chumash. Chapter nine of Bamidbar describes the Pesach offering brought by the Jewish people in the wilderness a year after leaving Egypt. Verse one of that chapter states that the command to bring the offering was transmitted to Moshe: "בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן – in the **first** month," i.e., Nissan. Rashi there comments:⁴

*The section at the beginning of this Chumash was not stated until Iyar (the **second** month)! This teaches that there is no "before" and "after" in the Torah.⁵ And why did it not open with this [section]? Since it reflects negatively on the Bnei Yisrael; for the entire forty years they were in the wilderness they only brought this one Pesach offering.*

This comment of Rashi is quite unusual. On the one hand, Rashi references the concept of "no before and after in the Torah" several times throughout his commentary on the Chumash. Generally, though, he suffices with identifying that the sections are not written in chronological order and leaves it at that. On this occasion, however, he took the extra step of asking why this is so! It appears the reason for this is that in this instance *the Torah itself* has gone out of its way to highlight the change in order by "timestamping" both of these chapters, writing explicitly that the events of chapter one took place in the second month, while those of chapter nine took place in the first month. If the chronological order will not be preserved, why is it mentioned? Clearly, here, the Torah wants us to notice this disruption and to take a lesson from it; namely, as Rashi's proceeds to discuss, that this episode was deferred because it reflects negatively on Israel.

There is a profound point here. After all, let us ask: If this section reflects negatively in Israel, then why not *leave it out altogether*? The answer, of course, is that it cannot be entirely left out, as there are lessons the Torah wants us to learn from it. However, there still remains the question of *where* it should be written, and the answer to that is: Not in the beginning! The opening of a Chumash sets the tone; it provides, so to speak, the canvas upon which subsequent events are laid. The Torah's essential evaluation of the Jewish people is never anything other than positive. If they did something negative from which future generations need to learn, then by all means write about it – but put it in a later chapter.

3 The questions we have cited relate to Rashi's comment in terms of his goal and methodology. See also commentators on Rashi who discuss further question relating the comment itself, such as: 1.) Why does Rashi refer to three occasions as "the whole time"? 2.) If the countings are purely an expression of love, why does Rashi provide an additional reason for the second count – to know how many were left after the episode with the Egel? 3) If the Divine presence already resided with them from the beginning of Nissan with the inauguration of the Mishkan, why were they only counted in the month of Iyar?

4 S.v. *bachodesh*.

5 I.e. the sequence in which the Torah presents events does not always reflect the order in which they occurred, see Pesachim 7b.

IN THE TAAMEI HAMIKRA

We have mentioned in an earlier discussion the idea of the Vilna Gaon that the *taamei hamikra* (cantillation notes), in addition to indicating how to sing the words in the verses, also function as a form of commentary to those words. In this instance, one can see that our discussion is contained within the *taamim* of the opening verse of chapter nine which introduce the korban pesach:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר־סִינַי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִיית לְצֵאתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן לְאָמֹר

Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai in the second year of their leaving Egypt, in the first month, saying.

- The opening *taam*, repeated three times, is called a *munach*, which means set aside.
- The *taam* on the word סִינַי is called a *telishah gedolah*, which means a major detachment.
- The *taamim* on the words בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִיית are called *kadma ve'azla*, which means to go early.
- The *taamim* on the words מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם are called *darga tevir*, which means a broken level.

Thus, the verse begins by noting that this section has been set aside (*munach*) three times, for although it should have opened the first parsha of the Chumash, it has been deferred until the middle of the third. This constitutes a major detachment (*telishah gedolah*) from its historical location, seeing as it actually happened earlier (*kadma ve'azla*), the reason being that the level (*darga*) described in this section of bringing the Pesach offering was not maintained by the Jewish people, but was rather disrupted (*tevir*) and discontinued after the first year.

BACK TO THE CHAPTER ONE

Bearing the above in mind, we return to Rashi's opening comment in our parsha. We asked, why is Rashi commenting on a thematic question that does not relate to the explanation on the verses themselves – especially considering that he has never done so on any such previous occasions?

We can now understand that our case is different. The opening verse of the parsha states explicitly that the command to count Bnei Yisrael took place "in the second month," indicating clearly that this is not the earliest event to be described in Chumash Bamidbar. Why then, is it mentioned first? The answer is: When we consider the reason the earlier episode (korban Pesach) was deferred from opening the Chumash, as it reflects *negatively* of the Jewish people, we can then understand on what basis this later section was chosen to take its place – as it reflects *positively* on them, as Rashi explains: "Due to their beloved nature, Hashem counts them constantly."⁶

It emerges that here, too, Rashi's comment is aimed at resolving an issue that emerges from the verse, namely, the timing of the count. Moreover, it is for this reason Rashi's comments are located not in verse two, which describes the count itself, but in verse one, which states when it was commanded, for that, ultimately, is what Rashi is coming to explain.

6 *Amar Nakeh* on Rashi's Commentary to the Torah by Rabbeinu Ovadyah of Bartenura.