

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## BAMIDBAR

### Concerning Chumash Bamidbar

#### INTRODUCTION: THE NAME OF THE FOURTH CHUMASH

The method with which we are familiar for naming the various chumashim of the Torah is to call them after the first distinctive word in that particular Chumash, so that we know them as Bereishis, Shemos etc. In the discussions of Chazal, however, we see that a different system was used, whereby each chumash was named based on the theme of that chumash. In terms of the Bamidbar, we see that the name used by Chazal is “חומש המקודים – The Chumash of the Countings.”<sup>1</sup> This is in recognition of the fact that the chumash both begins and ends with a counting of the Jewish people.

This choice of name, however, seems somewhat perplexing. While it is true that this chumash records those countings, it also relates so many episodes that were of enormous significance – both for that generation and for future generations: The episodes of the *misonenim* and *kivros hataavah*, the sending of spies to the land of Canaan, Korach’s rebellion, Moshe hitting the rock, *ba’al pe’or*, the wars with Sichon, Og and Midian and so on. With all due respect to the counts, naming the chumash after them seems to miss its thematic content more or less entirely!

In fact, however, the Netziv<sup>2</sup> explains that the counts at the beginning and end of this chumash encapsulate its critical theme totally. All we need is to know how to read them...

#### DIVIDING BETWEEN LIGHT AND DARKNESS

There is a fascinating midrash<sup>3</sup> which states that the earliest reference in the Torah to the five chumashim is in the verses describing the creation of light,<sup>4</sup> for as we know, the Torah is compared to light.<sup>5</sup> In those verses, the word “אור – light” is mentioned five times:

1 See e.g. Yoma 68b and Sotah 36b.

2 Haamek Davar, Introduction to Bamidbar.

3 Bereishis Rabbah 3:5.

4 Bereishis 1:3-5.

5 See Mishlei 6:23, “כי נר מצוה ותורה אור” – For a mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light!

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹר – זה חומש בראשית

וַיְהִי אֹר – זה חומש שמות

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאֹר כִּי טוֹב – זה חומש ויקרא

וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ – זה חומש במדבר

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם – זה חומש דברים

*God said, “Let there be light” – this is Chumash Bereishis.*

*And there was light – this is Chumash Shemos.*

*God saw the light that it was good – this is Chumash Vayikra.*

*God divided between the light and the darkness – this is Chumash Bamidbar.*

*God call the light “day” – this is Chumash Devarim.*

Needless to say, each of these five allusions is deserving of elaboration in its own right. In terms of the present discussion, we see that that Chumash Bamidbar corresponds to the fourth mention of light, namely, dividing between light and darkness. How does this concept express itself in this Chumash?

## NETZIV: TWO MODES OF EXISTENCE

The Netziv refers to the well-known idea that the mode of existence for the Jewish people in the Wilderness was fundamentally different to the one waiting for them in the Land of Israel:

- ▷ In the Wilderness, Hashem’s supervision was openly and directly manifest in the form of the miracles that accompanied them constantly.
- ▷ In contrast to this, in the Land of Israel, Hashem’s supervision would take the form of guiding the forces of nature, as opposed to that of open miracles.

These two modes of existence are referred to by the midrash as “light” and “darkness” respectively. The first mode is called “light”, as Hashem’s involvement was clear and plain to see, while the second mode is called “darkness”, reflecting the fact that it was more hidden. Having said that, of course, the ultimate goal was to move from the mode of light to that of darkness in order to bring the Divine presence into the natural world. The initial period of light was crucial in order to instill awareness of Hashem within the people in their formative stage, so that they could first absorb these concepts in their obvious and miraculous form before applying them to the more natural realm.

The transition between these two modes of existence did not take place overnight. Rather, it was a process, different stages of which took place over the course of several years. Indeed, says the Netziv, it is this transition from light to darkness that forms the main theme of Chumash Bamidbar.

## IDENTIFYING THE STAGES OF TRANSITION

The naturalization of the Jewish people can be seen very clearly in the events of the fortieth year in the Wilderness, as described from Parshas Chukkas and onwards. As they move closer to the Land, they need

to engage in natural endeavors such as negotiations for safe passage, as well as in wars where necessary. However, the beginning of this process can be discerned as far back as the second year in the Wilderness. Indeed, a critical and fateful issue was exactly when and how this transition should take place. For as we will see, in this matter, the view of the people diverged from that of Hashem.

To live in the Presence of Hashem's light is very demanding. It means, among other things, that any wrongdoing is liable to be punished swiftly and decisively. This idea receives stark expression in the Torah's account of the *misonenim* in the beginning of chapter eleven, which takes place over roughly three verses, whereby the people complained and were punished more or less immediately. This is encapsulated in the verse's description of their complaining being evil “בִּאָזְנֵי ה' – in the ears of Hashem.” Whenever expression “בִּאָזְנֵי” is used, it always denotes something said directly to the listener. Here, with the Divine Presence so close, their words of complain went “straight to Hashem's ears,” so to speak, with the resulting immediate punishment.

This experience marked the beginning of the people looking to move away from the light somewhat quicker than they should have. Chazal inform us that the final two verses of Chapter ten are enclosed between two letter *nuns* because they form a *sefer* in their own right. In terms of our discussion, says the Netziv, those enclosed verses mark the initial turning point from light to darkness. As such, due to the high standards demanded of them by life in the Wilderness, the people's schedule for transition began earlier than it should have. It was this disparity between the two “clocks of transition” that precipitated the major events of Chumash Bamidbar.

## SENDING SPIES – GOOD FOR THE JEWS?

Without doubt, the episode in Chumash Bamidbar which would reverberate most throughout our history was that of sending the spies to the Land of Canaan. The simple question is raised: Was sending spies itself an improper idea? The answer, says the Netziv, is that it depends which mode the people are in:

- ▷ If they are in “light” mode, with Hashem's providence openly manifest, sending spies is redundant, and therefore, objectionable.
- ▷ However, if they are in “dark” mode, working within nature, then sending spies is most appropriate.

As such, the question now becomes: Which mode were the people in – and is that the mode they *should* have been in?

Had the people followed Hashem's timetable for transition, they would still be in light mode, and sending spies would not have been necessary. However, with the people having moved to naturalize earlier, they had thereby entered into a mode where it was now acceptable to send spies. In other words, the problem was not in the idea itself of sending spies, but in the electing to prematurely place themselves in a mode where this was appropriate.

Ironically, having overly invested in naturalization, the spies sent by the people approached the land itself with purely natural eyes. This resulted in them concluding that they could not conquer the mighty inhabitants of the land – and in absolute “natural” terms, they were right! The result was a stay in the Wilderness for forty years, over which they could more fully absorb an awareness of Hashem's supervision, so that when the time finally came for them to enter the land, they did so with trust and confidence that Hashem would bless their military efforts with success.

## BEING COUNTED IN

With all this in mind, let us now return to the matter of the countings in the beginning and the end of our Chumash, for if we look closely and “allow the numbers to speak,” we will see that they bracket and

reflect the transition which is the key theme of Bamidbar. One basic difference between the two counts is that while in Parshas Bamidbar, the people are counted both as twelve tribes and also as four camps of three tribes each, in Parshas Pinchas they are counted only as tribes. The reason for this is that two counts essentially reflect the Jewish people within the two modes of “light” and “dark” existence, respectively:

- ▷ The count at the beginning of the sefer reflects the Jewish people in Wilderness (“light”) mode. For this reason, the people are counted not only according to tribe, but once again as four camps of three tribes each encamped around the Mishkan. This encampment represented the proximity to Hashem’s revealed Divine presence.
- ▷ The count at the end of the Chumash reflects the people at the end of their stay in the Wilderness, as they are about to enter the more natural (“dark”) setting of the Land of Israel. As such, in this count, they are reckoned only as tribes, no longer as camps centered around the Mishkan.

## MENASHE AND EFRAIM

This idea will also explain an additional difference between the two counts – of quite a different kind. The order in which the tribes are counted on both occasions is identical, with one exception, relating to the two tribes within Yosef:

- ▷ In Parshas Bamidbar, Efraim is counted before Menashe.
- ▷ In Parshas Pinchas, Menashe is counted first.

What is behind this change in order?

To understand the meaning of this switch, we need to go back to when the two brothers, Menashe and Efraim, both received their blessings from Yaakov and were set on their respective destinies. As we know, Yosef placed his older son, Menashe, at Yaakov’s right side, naturally assuming that he would receive the more prominent blessing represented by the right hand. Yaakov, however, had other plans and switched his hands to give Efarim the right and Menashe the left. In the words of the verse:

שָׁכַל אֶת יָדָיו כִּי מְנַשֶּׁה הַבְּכוֹר

*He switched his hands, for Menashe was the firstborn.<sup>6</sup>*

The commentators raise a simple question regarding the wording of this verse. By saying “for Menashe was the firstborn,” it appears to be providing the reason for Yaakov switching his hands. But surely Menashe being the firstborn would be reason *not* to switch the hands. If they were switched, it was *in spite of* Menashe being the firstborn, not *because of* it!<sup>7</sup>

In addition to this, the Netziv<sup>8</sup> raises a disarmingly simple question. If Yaakov in fact felt that his grandsons were placed incorrectly, why did he redress this by switching his *hands*? Why not switch his *grandchildren*, simply asking them to change places?

The Netziv explains that, in reality, Yaakov’s grandsons were exactly where he felt they needed to be to receive their blessings. The success with which Yaakov wished to bless them was two-fold, temporal and spiritual. The prominence that he bestowed to Efraim was specifically in the spiritual realm. With regards to material success, however, Menashe, the firstborn, was the one blessed with prominence. These two

---

6 Bereishis 48:14.

7 See e.g. commentaries of Rabbeinu Bachye and Abarbanel to Bereishis ibid.

8 *Haamek Davar*, Bereishis ibid.

realms are represented by Yaakov's hands and feet, respectively:

- ▷ The hand represents wisdom, as it expresses in various ways the wisdom and talent of the person. Therefore, Efraim received Yaakov's right hand – reflecting his prominence in the spiritual realm – and Menashe the left hand.
- ▷ The leg, being the physical base of the body, represents basic physical movement. Therefore, Menashe was placed at Yaakov's right leg, reflecting his prominence in that realm, and Efraim at his left.

This is what is being expressed by the verse when it says that Yaakov “switched his hands” – i.e. and not his grandchildren – “*because* Menashe was the firstborn,” and therefore his rightful place was at Yaakov's right side, exactly where he was!

## FIRST TO BE COUNTED

With this in mind, let us return once more to the two counts in Chumash Bamidbar. We would naturally assume that, of the two tribes of Yosef, the more prominent one should be counted first. Should we then ask, which of the two is the more prominent, we will now appreciate that this question will be answered by a question of its own: In what respect? For as we have seen, the two realms of prominence were divided between the two sons. Therefore:

- ▷ In the first count, at the beginning of the sefer, when the people were entering the more spiritual mode, prominence was reckoned accordingly in spiritual terms, and hence, Efraim was counted first.
- ▷ In the second count, at the end of the sefer, when the people were entering the more physical setting of the land of Israel, prominence was assessed in those terms, and hence Menashe was counted first on that occasion.

And so, having identified the central theme of Chumash Bamidbar, and having seen how the two counts in the sefer mark not only two separate stages in our history, but also two distinct modes of existence, we can now better understand Chazal's choice of title in referring to Bamidbar as “The Chumash of the Countings.”