

Parshas Bamidbor is the parsha we read right before Shavuos. We mentioned last week that the gemara says we have to read brochos and k'lalos before Shavuos. So why do we insert Parshas Bamidbor in-between? Two reasons are given. One is to inspire us again after reading the very heavy parsha of the tochocho. It is true that we accept the Torah as a kabbolas ol – not just because it is pleasant. Hashem has chosen us out of all the nations of the world to be His representatives. It is an awesome responsibility. But we should also be inspired to accept the Torah as well.

The Ramban says the first of the Aseres haDibbros is a Mitzvas Assei. "I am Hashem...Who took you out of Egypt." One aspect of the mitzvah is to learn the lessons of yetzias Mitzrayim, where the truth of all the yesodos emunoh were illustrated in front of our eyes. Additionally, the fact that we must attribute our ability to leave Egypt to Hashem also serves as a basis for the moral obligation to accept all the mitzvos Hashem is commanding us, because everything that we have was granted to us by Hashem when He freed us from slavery. This receiving of freedom and all the potential we have, creates a debt of gratitude that must be paid back. So when Hashem commands us to perform mitzvos, we are morally obligated to accept them in order to pay back our debt.

All this potential to be elevated by fulfilling Torah and mitzvos is not optional. It is a very scary thing. So we need to be calmed before kabbolas haTorah by reading Bamidbor.

Another reason for reading Bamidbor is to receive the messages of the degolim that each shevet received, and the arrangement of the encampment around the Mishkon.

The midrash says there was an incredible simchoh when each shevet received their flag – like the simchoh of kabbolas haTorah! This is very puzzling. What is so gratifying about waving a flag?

The answer is that the simchoh didn't come from the piece of colored cloth. It came from the fact that each flag symbolized the unique derech avodoh that each shevet had. Yaakov Ovinu and Moshe Rabbeinu gave each of the 12 shevotim special brochos revealing their unique character and personality which can be channeled into a unique derech in avodas Hashem. When you get 613 mitzvos, it can be disorienting and confusing. Because even though everyone is obligated to keep the basic halacha, there are so many ways to keep each mitzvah. And without some kind of direction and derech, one will be lost and frustrated because he doesn't know how to express his deeper kochos hanefesh through these mitzvos.

Eleven months after kabbolas haTorah, Hashem informs each shevet what their unique derech avodoh is, symbolized by the degel. This gives them tremendous simchoh because now they can properly channel their kochos hanefesh in their avodas Hashem.

The encampment of the shevotim around the Mishkon also provides a valuable lesson before Shavuos.

Twelve Shevotim formed the outer perimeter of the machaneh, and Shevet Levi was closer to the middle surrounding the Mishkon and Moshe Rabbeinu. Each shevet was equidistant to the Mishkon – no shevet was closer to the Mishkon than the other. There is a beautiful message here which is also expressed by the Chazal which says that in the future, the tzaddikim will form a circle around the Shechinoh. Each one will be pointing to the center thinking that his derech avodoh is

better than anyone else's, but Hashem will say that all of them are equally valid and valuable.

Although each of the 12 shevotim were equidistant to the Mishkon relative to each other and none was superior to his peers, Shevet Levi was still closer than all of them and formed an inner, more exclusive circle. Why was Shevet Levi chosen? Moshe Rabbeinu's brocho to Shevet Levi in V'zos Habrocho explains that this shevet is committed exclusively to avodas Hashem and teaching Torah to Klal Yisroel with tremendous mesiras nefesh. They didn't compromise and didn't commit the sins that the rest of Klal Yisroel fell prey to. The Eigel, the complaining, the cheit haMeraglim – Shevet Levi participated in none of them.

Klal Yisroel in Egypt were in a very interesting situation. This is something I repeat often but is very important for understanding the times we live in.

The goal of Yaakov and Yosef was to set up a ghetto where the Jews in golus would be isolated and insulated from the surrounding Egyptian culture. It was the most advanced and sophisticated, yet the most decadent culture of the ancient world. Pharaoh agreed to support the Bnei Yisroel in perpetuity and they didn't have to worry about parnossoh while they lived in Goshen. But when Yaakov and the Shevotim died, the Jews who grew up without the influence of the older generation wanted to leave the ghetto and integrate into the society around them. But Shevet Levi remained in Goshen learning Torah – being supported by Pharaoh. They remained separate and committed to avodas Hashem throughout this entire period. They proved themselves worthy over and over again through all the tests of the midbor. So Hashem says Shevet Levi belongs in the inner circle closer to the Shechinoh while the rest of the shevotim are on the periphery.

It might not seem fair, but as the Rambam says at the end of Hilchos Shmittah V'Yovel, everyone has the option of upgrading their level of avodas Hashem and join Shevet Levi. There are two levels one can operate on in Yiddishkeit – the minimal level of basic shemiras hamitzvos, and then dedicating your entire life to avodas Hashem which can be attained at higher and higher levels. Shevet Levi is kulo kodosh and they forget about all the cheshbonos of the world. They are Hashem's chelek.

The Rambam says there are two criteria for joining Shevet Levi. One is you have to understand who Hashem is and the awesome opportunity it is to serve the Creator of the Universe. But in addition to having an intellectual understanding, one has to be inspired and realize what kind of privilege it is to dedicate one's life to serving Hashem.

Each shevet is given their place and Levi is on the inside, but everyone has access to joining Shevet Levi if they are willing to make the necessary sacrifices.

Another aspect of this week's parsha is the census which was taken of the Jewish population. They were counted on the basis of the father's family line and it was conducted by the nosi of each shevet. The names of each nosi are mentioned, and the midrash comments that these are very beautiful Hebrew names – many of which incorporate the Shem Hashem or refer to Hashem in some way.

אֶלְיָצוּר בֶּן שְׂדֵיאוּר: שְׁלֵמִיאל בֶּן צוּרִישְׁדֵי: נְתַנְאֵל בֶּן צוּפֵר: אֶלְיָאֵב בֶּן חֵלִן:  
 אֶלְיָשָׁקֵעַ בֶּן עֲפִיאוּד: גַּמְלִיאֵל בֶּן פְּדָהצוּר:

This indicates that the Jews in Egypt were living with a paradox. On the one hand, they wanted to assimilate and integrate into Egyptian culture and be accepted by Egyptian society – they even stopped bris miloh in order to be accepted! But on the other hand, at their core, they knew who they were and remained loyal to their Ivri identity. They didn't change their names or clothing or language. They gave names to their children that reflected that they were Hashem's people.

Additionally, the Torah testifies that throughout the time the Jews were under absolute the control of the Egyptians, almost no-one committed adultery. There was a single exception out of the many hundreds of thousands of women for generations under slavery who remained completely faithful to their husbands. Maintaining kedushoh and purity of mind in the midst of an unrelenting emphasis on znus in the media has become a serious nisayon in our generation. Bilaam tried to curse Klal Yisroel, but he can't, because Hashem is protecting them. So Billam advised Bolok how to make Klal Yisroel vulnerable and remove Hashem's protection. He told him Hashem despises znus. So if you can use your women to seduce the Jewish men, you will be able to defeat them. And this is exactly what happened. They got 24,000 pretty girls to go out, and they were able to cause the death of 24,000 Jews.

The Ramban says that the three cardinal aveiros which one has to give up his life to avoid, are put in a specific order of severity. Arayos is second only to avodo zoro. They are issurei koreis. The Torah repeatedly warns us about them and instruct us to make gedorim around them. Why is it so severe? A pre-occupation with arayos corrupts a person's personality on a very deep level. It contaminates his whole thinking process and makes him totally insensitive to ruchniyus. Klal Yisroel kept themselves pure in an environment of a cesspool of arayos in Egypt. Despite Klal Yisroel's drive to assimilate, they knew to stay away from arayos. This has unfortunately become a very deep nisayon in our generation.

The mishkon was already completed and Klal Yisroel are ready to move to Eretz Yisroel, but Hashem says He needs to pause to identify who they are: They remained pure and loyal to their families, and they were given degolim to identify their derech in avodas Hashem. This is why I can have a Mishkon surrounded by them and have My Shechinoh dwell among them.

This dedication of Jewish women to family purity is a great source of pride and it has to be emphasized – it was integrated into the keilim of

the Mishkon itself. Hashem told Moshe to make the copper kiyor and kano out of the copper mirrors of the Jewish wives. Every kohen who participates in the avodoh will wash his hands and feet and make them pure through these same copper mirrors used by the Jewish wives to keep the marriage bond with their husbands strong and holy. Even in the midst of the corrupt cesspool of arayos in Egypt, they maintained their fidelity.

The names of Klal Yisroel also reflected their unique Jewish identity that they took pride in. Nesanel, Tzuri-Shakai, etc. The name you go by isn't something trivial. It is how you identify who you are and where you feel you belong in the world. If you call yourself George or Richard rather than Reuven or Shimon, you are telling the world – and you are telling yourself – which society you really want to associate with. Klal Yisroel – even in Egypt – still felt they primarily belonged to a society of Jews.

There is an important Taz which says that regardless of the specific source for the chiyuv of Jewish men to wear head coverings, in the reality of society it identifies you as a Jew and distinguishes you from a non-Jew. If you don't wear one, it is a violation of adopting non-Jewish customs.

As Klal Yisroel are organizing themselves and getting ready to come to Eretz Yisroel, Hashem says we need to first pause and clarify a few very important things. Hashem wants every shevet to know their place around the Mishkon, their unique derech avodoh, and to be aware of their commitment to shemiroh from arayos. They are leaving a cesspool of arayos of Egypt and they are headed to a cesspool of arayos in Canaan. They need to be acutely aware of how powerful their purity is – because it allows the Shechinoh to be with them. And we will see the extreme consequences of deviating from that purity when we come to Parshas Bolok. The pull of arayos is so powerful that it can lead a person who has the closest connection to Hashem imaginable to reject everything and worship the lowest, most debasing form of avodo zoro – Baal Peor.

These are the ideas we need to think about when we come to kabbolas haTorah. Each one has his unique derech avodoh, and each one can join Shevet Levi. And you need to remember your commitment to protecting your purity and staying away from znus, and preserving your Jewish identity by taking pride in your Jewish name – to constantly remind yourself who you really are.