

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Bamidbar

5 Sivan, 5779 – June 8, 2019

Compiled from the works of
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An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi Parshas Bamidbar

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Rashi in His Own Words

במדבר א', מ"ט: אַךְ אֶת־מִטֵּה לְוִי לֹא תִפְקֹד וְאֶת־רֵאשֵׁם לֹא תִשָּׂא בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

רש"י ד"ה אך את מטה לוי לא תפקד: כדאי הוא לגיון של מלך להיות נמנה לבדו. דבר אחר, צפה הקב"ה שעתידה לעמוד גזירה על כל הנמנין מבין עשרים שנה ומעלה שימותו במדבר, אמר אל יהיו אלו בכלל, לפי שהם שלי, שלא טעו בעגל:

Bamidbar 1:49: Only, you shall not count the tribe of Levi, and you shall not reckon their total among the Jewish people.

Rashi Heading: Only, you shall not count the tribe of Levi: The legion of the king deserves to be counted on its own. Another explanation (is that) the Holy One Blessed Be He foresaw that a decree was destined to be enacted against all those counted from twenty years and upward¹, that they would die in the desert. He said, "Let these (the tribe of Levi) not be included, for they are Mine; because they did not err with the golden calf."

Synopsis

In this week's Torah portion, Bamidbar, we are told that the entire Jewish Nation was counted. Upon concluding the detailed count, the Torah tells us that the tribe of Levi was omitted. It says that² "Only, you shall not count the tribe of Levi, and you shall not reckon their total among the Jewish people." The Torah is not saying not to count the tribe of Levi; rather it says not to count them together with their fellow Jews. Indeed, their tribe was counted³. However, their census was separate from, and performed in a different manner than that of the rest of the Jews⁴.

Rashi gives two explanations for this. The first is that the tribe of Levi is the "King's Legion." As such, they deserve to be counted on their own. His second explanation is that Hashem foresaw that everyone who was counted from the age of 20 would die in the wilderness. He did not want the Levites who did not sin with the Golden Calf, to be included in this decree. He therefore counted them separately, from the age of one month.

Why does Rashi offer two explanations? The first explanation would seem to suffice. This is especially true being that Rashi's second explanation does not seem to be in accordance with Peshat.

The explanation is that Rashi is actually answering a different question. Why does the Torah say both "you shall not count" them and "you shall not reckon their total?" Each expression must refer to a different aspect

1. That included all other Jews who were counted prior to the counting of the tribe of Levi.

2. Our Parshah, Bamidbar 1:49.

3. See our Parshah beginning with Bamidbar 3:15.

4. All males from the other tribes were counted from age 20 and older. The males of the tribe of Levi were counted beginning from the age of one month.

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of counting. The difference is that “count” is a verb which refers to the act of counting. “You shall not reckon their total” refers to knowing the grand total of Levites.

The other tribes (excluding the Levites) were counted by each giving a half-shekel⁵. The Shekalim were counted in order to determine the number of Jews⁶. The Levites were counted in a different manner; they were counted⁷ “according to Hashem’s word.”

This explains the seeming redundancy in the verse. “You shall not reckon their total,” meaning that the sum of the tribe of Levi was not included with that of the other Jews. Additionally, “you shall not count” them. The method of counting the Levites was completely different than that used to count the other tribes.

Rashi’s Explanation

This week’s Torah portion, Bamidbar, begins with a census of all of the tribes of Israel. However, conspicuous by their absence is the tribe of Levi. They were not included in this count. The Torah says that² “Only you shall not count the tribe of Levi, and you shall not reckon their total among the Jewish people.” Rashi cites the words “only you shall not count the tribe of Levi.” He explains that “The legion of the king deserves to be counted on its own. Another explanation (is that) the Holy One Blessed Be He foresaw that a decree was destined to be enacted against all those counted from twenty years and upward, that they would die in the desert. He said, ‘Let these (the tribe of Levi) not be included, for they are Mine because they did not err with the golden calf.’”

Rashi is not coming to explain the reason that the Levites were not counted. Indeed, they were counted, albeit separately from the other tribes³. They were also counted in a different manner and with different parameters. Each member of the tribe of Levi was counted beginning from the age of one month. The rest of the Jews were counted from the age of 20. The verse which we are explaining says specifically that the Levites were not counted “among the Jewish people,” together with the other Jews. It does not say that they were not counted.

This is what seems to bother Rashi. Why was the tribe of Levi counted separately from the rest of the Jews? He gives two answers to this question. Firstly, he explains that they are Hashem’s legion, His *personal* troop (as so to speak). This being the case they deserve to be counted individually. Rashi’s second explanation is that there was a decree issued against those who were counted from the age of 20. In as much as the Levites are “His,” Hashem did not want them to be included in this decree.

5. See Rashi’s comments to our Parshah, Bamidbar 1:2 under the heading “a head count.” See also his comments to Parshas Ki Siso, Shemos 30:15.

6. See Rashi’s comments to Parshas Ki Siso, Shemos 30:12.

7. See Rashi’s comments to our Parshah, Bamidbar 3:16.

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Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

Rashi selects the words “only you shall not count the tribe of Levi” as the heading of his comments. As we have discussed many times, that means that those are the only words from the verse which he is explaining. However, based on our explanation he is also (or primarily) explaining the words “among the Jewish people.” His comments explain why the Levites were not counted among – meaning together with – the rest of the Jewish people. This being the case he should include these words in his heading. At the very least he should write et cetera (וגומר) after the heading to at least hint that these words are also being explained.

Additionally, we are saying that Rashi is bothered by the fact that the tribe of Levi was not counted together with the other Jews. If that is the case, Rashi should have explained this earlier. The Torah said⁸ “But the Levites, according to their father's tribe were not counted among them.” At that point, prior to our verse, the difficulty was already present. Yet there Rashi says nothing.

Finally, why does Rashi need to give two different explanations here? His first explanation seems to explain our difficulty. Here the need for a second explanation is particularly difficult. The second explanation seems to be Midrashic. It seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with Peshat.

The Explanation

The difficulties in understanding Rashi often stem from not understanding exactly what question Rashi is answering. That is the cause of our present difficulty. Rashi is not explaining why the tribe of Levi was counted separately. Rashi already told us at the beginning of our Torah portion that “Because they (the Jews) were dear to Him, He counted them often.” It is logical to infer that the tribe of Levi, being the most precious, would have their own census.

What actually bothers Rashi is as follows. There seems to be a redundancy within our verse itself. It says that² “only *you shall not count the tribe of Levi*, and then says that “*you shall not reckon their total* among the Jewish people.” Both “you shall not count” and “you shall not reckon their total” seem to mean the same thing. Why does the verse seem to repeat itself? This is what Rashi is teaching us.

Despite the fact that both words have the same general meaning, each refers to a different sort of counting. “Count” is a verb which refers to the act of counting. “Reckon their total” refers to determining the actual sum of those who are being counted.

According to Rashi there is an essential difference between how the Jews were counted and how the tribe of Levi was counted. The other tribes were counted by each male above the age of 20 giving a half-shekel⁵. Rashi explains it in the following manner⁶. “When you wish to take the sum of their numbers to know how many they

8. Our Parshah, Bamidbar 1:47.

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are, do not count each individual. (Rather) each one shall give a half-shekel, and you shall count the shekels. (That is how) you will know their number.”

The Torah explains that the Levites were counted⁷ “according to Hashem’s word.” Rashi explains this to mean the following. “Moshe said to Hashem, ‘How can I enter their tents in order to know how many babies they have?’ The Holy One blessed be He replied to him, ‘you do your part, and I will do Mine.’ Moshe went and stood at the entrance of the tent. The Shechinah preceded him. A heavenly voice then emanated from the tent saying, ‘This is the number of babies which are in this tent.’ That is why it says ‘according to G-d’s word.’”

In other words, “you shall not reckon their total among the Jewish people,” meaning that the total of Levites will not be included with the count of all of the other tribes. Additionally, “the tribe of Levi you shall not count.” Even the manner of counting the tribe of Levi is totally different than the manner in which all of the other tribes were counted.

A Deeper Lesson from Rashi

There are three pillars upon which the world rests; Torah, the service (of sacrifices) and acts of loving kindness¹⁰. These are the three types of Divine service. Torah refers to Torah study. Service, the work of offering sacrifices refers to prayer. Today we pray in place of offering sacrifices. Deeds of loving kindness refers to the observance of Mitzvos.

Mitzvos were given with a specific count, a particular number. There are 613 Mitzvos. Furthermore, we are prohibited to either add to or subtract from any Mitzvah¹¹. The reason for this is that the primary idea of Mitzvos is to draw down G-dliness into this physical, limited world¹². Because of this, most Mitzvos are practical and action oriented. The majority of Divine commandments must be fulfilled with physical, limited objects. This is the idea of counting. Each number is also a part of this physical, limited world. That is why all of the tribes (besides that of Levi) had to be counted in the same manner.

What is the difference between Levi and the other tribes? They have a greater connection to Torah study. Torah is beyond the physical limitations of counting. It is therefore written about Torah that¹³ “It’s measure is longer than the earth, and wider than the sea.” However, the fact that it can be compared to the earth and the sea means that on a certain level it does have a count, a limitation.

This is the idea of the tribe of Levi; they did need to be counted. However, their count was separate and different than everyone else’s. They were Hashem’s legion, but they still needed to connect to their fellow Jews.

9. The difficulty here is that the Levites were counted from the age of one month. Moshe could not enter each Levite’s tent in order to count his babies.

10. See Pirkei Avos Chapter 1, Mishnah 2.

11. Parshas Vo’eschanan, Devorim 4:2. See also Parshas Re’eh, *ibid.* 13:1.

12. See Tanya Chapter 37 at length.

13. Iyov 11:9.

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This is because the Levites were¹⁴ “...set aside to serve G-d and minister unto Him and to instruct people at large in His just paths and righteous judgments, as the Torah says¹⁵, ‘They will teach Your judgments to Yaakov and Your Torah to Yisroel.’ Therefore, they were set apart from the ways of the world. They do not wage war like the remainder of the Jewish people, nor do they receive an inheritance, nor do they acquire for themselves through their physical power. Instead, they are Hashem's legion, as the Torah states¹⁶, ‘G-d has blessed His legion.’ He also provides for them, as it is written¹⁷, ‘I am your portion and your inheritance.’”

The service of prayer, however, is that of the “Kohen Gadol – High Priest.” His entire being was totally dedicated to Hashem. Through “Tefillah – Prayer” one can become totally bound with G-d. One can reach a level which completely transcends any count, any limitation whatsoever. This is the idea of the Kohen Gadol, who was so bound with Hashem that he could never even leave Yerushalayim.

That is why Rashi tells us¹⁸ that Aharon the Kohen Gadol was not included in any count, not even the count of the tribe of Levi.

(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Bamidbar 5726, 5740)

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14. See Rambam Laws of Shemittah and Yovel Chapter 13, Paragraph 12.

15. Parshas V'zos Haberochah, Devorim 33:10.

16. Parshas V'zos Haberochah, Devorim 33:11.

17. Parshas Korach, Bamidbar 18:20.

18. Our Parshah, Bamidbar 3:39.

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Passed away on Shabbos Parshas Beshalach, 13 Shevat, 5779

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