

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Bamidbar

4 Sivan, 5781 – May 15, 2021

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־מִטָּה לֹוִי לֹא תִפְקֹד וְאֶת־רֵאשִׁים 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 שעתידיה 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 this census did not include the tribe of Levi. 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, "do not count the tribe of Levi." Instead, it says not to count them *together* with their fellow Jews. Their tribe was counted³. However, their census was separate from and performed differently from 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 counted from age twenty 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. Therefore, he 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 because Rashi's second explanation does not seem to follow Peshat.

The explanation is that Rashi is 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 of

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 twenty and older. The males of the tribe of Levi were counted beginning from the age of one month.

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

The other tribes (excluding the Levites) were counted by each giving a half-shekel⁵. The Shekalim were counted 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 utterly 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 twenty. This verse says 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 counted from the age of twenty. Because the Levites are "His," Hashem did not want them 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. This 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 header to at least hint that he is also explaining these words.

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 said,⁸ "But the Levites, according to their father's tribe, were not counted among them." At that point, before 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 challenging. The second explanation seems to be Midrashic. It seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with Peshat.

The Explanation

Often, our difficulty in understanding Rashi is because we do not understand what question Rashi is answering. That is the cause of our present predicament. 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 a separate census.

What 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 explaining.

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

According to Rashi, the other Jews were counted in a fundamentally different way than the tribe of Levi. The other tribes were counted by each male above the age of twenty, 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 are, do not

8. Our Parshah, Bamidbar 1:47.

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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 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 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 different from that of all other tribes.

A Deeper Lesson from Rashi

There are three pillars upon which the world rests; the Torah, the service (of sacrifices), and acts of loving-kindness¹⁰. These are the three types of Divine service. Torah refers to the study of Torah. 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 the number of Mitzvos¹¹. This is because the primary idea of Mitzvos is to draw down G-dliness into this physical, limited world¹². This is why most Mitzvos are practical and action-oriented, which we must fulfill with physical, finite objects. This is the idea of counting. Each number is also a part of this material, finite world. That is why all tribes (besides 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. Therefore, it is written about Torah that¹³ "Its measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea." However, it is comparable to the earth and the sea. This means that it does have a count on a certain level.

This is the idea of the tribe of Levi; they did need to have a census. However, their count was separate and different from everyone else's. They were Hashem's legion, but they still needed to connect to their fellow Jews. This is because the Levites were¹⁴ "...set aside to serve G-d and minister unto Him and to instruct people at large

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.

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

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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 says¹⁷, 'I am your portion and your inheritance.'"

The service of prayer, however, is that of the "Kohen Gadol – High Priest." He dedicated his entire being to Hashem. Through "Tefillah – Prayer," one can become bound with G-d. One can reach a level that ultimately 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 talks given on Shabbos Parshas Bamidbar 5726, 5740)

I hope that you gained as much by reading this as I did by translating and adapting it.

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

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

17. Parshas Korach, Bamidbar 18:20.

18. Our Parshah, Bamidbar 3:39.

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