

פרשת במדבר

OVERVIEW

The fourth book of Moses begins with the counting of the Israelites that is to be carried out by the tribal princes. The total number, not including the Levites, was 603,550 fit men, 20 years of age and above. The counting of the Levite males came to 22,000. As they had to take the place of the first-born males (man for man) and there was a surplus of 273 first-born above the number of 22,000, it became necessary to pay the amount of five Shekalim for each man towards the temple treasury. – The twelve tribes, divided in four groups of three tribes each, were located in camps surrounding the sanctuary. The text lists the exact locations and the tribes assigned to them.

COMMENTARY

The Counting

The text returns to our ancestor's life in the desert by counting the population and the arrangements of its encampments surrounding the sanctuary. The counting involved two elements: tribe and family. An eligible man cannot be entrusted with public responsibilities unless he satisfies the immediate duties involved in the life of his family. The Torah thus emphasizes the all-important place of the family in its relationship to the state that in turn is obliged to support and guarantee the security and integrity of the family. Despite the theocratic character of our national existence, we abhor the concept of totalitarianism that imposes a vigorous uniformity on all citizens and requires the subordination of every individual initiative to "the higher cause".

How is it that the men are only counted when they are twenty years old and above while the boys "come of age" at thirteen years? The law considers the seven years following a boy's Bar Mitzva as the crucial period of growing maturity that is needed before he will be able to carry out his duties as a full member of the community. Yet during

this period, the Jewish adolescent is subject to all religious duties before G-d as part of his preparation for full Jewish living.

The Encampments

We shall attempt to interpret the order and location of the encampments in the desert in the contest of Yaakov's blessing of his twelve sons.

In the east, heading the ranks of the twelve tribes, is Yehuda; assigned to him are Yissachar and Zebulun. Yehuda, the royal tribe, is the natural leader. He will guide and coordinate the entire national structure in the desert and in the Jewish land. Yissachar, tribe of farmers, and Zebulun, tribe of commerce and trade, are Yehuda's neighbors; they represent the two positive elements on which the material and moral foundation of the nation rests. (Yissachar also represents those who are able to study the Torah intensively. In contrast to the merchant who is normally fully occupied with his business affairs, the Jewish farmer has sufficient free time during periods of draught and the Shemitta year to devote himself to Torah study).

In the south and to the right, are Reuben, Simeon and Gad. As the easily aroused avengers of the national honor (one recalls their conduct in the episode involving their sister Dinah), Reuben and Simeon lack the circumspection and prudent judgment needed for effective leadership. Yet their place at the right side of the sanctuary symbolizes strength and determination, qualities essential for the nation's survival.

In the north, to the left: Dan, Asher and Naftali. Dan personifies intelligence and astuteness; Asher represents refinement of taste; Naftali, eloquent and persuasive. Thus the group, in its homogeneous composition, reflects the intellectual and cultural potency of the nations and complements most beneficially the political and economic aspiration for the brother tribes.

Forming the "rearguard" on the west are Ephraim, Menashe and Benjamin. Descendant from Rachel, they share Joseph's outstanding qualities: steadfastness, resoluteness, purity of character and firmness against foreign influences. These traits earned them the distinction of being the tribes who gave courage to the dejected, support to the weak and inspiration to a nation endangered by the threat of assimilation and blind conformity.

Looked at as a whole, the four encampments form a most impressive block: strong leadership at the top, circumspect guard at the rear, on the right courageous initiative, and spiritual resourcefulness on the left. United, Israel is unassailable; divided, it is threatened by fatal weakness. Watched over by the Levites, servants of the invisible G-d, the four groups are ranged around the sanctuary, the sacred source of our national existence.

The twelve Princes

Our Sidrah records the appointment of the twelve princes who are to assist Moshe in his overwhelming task. Each is listed by name and that of their father. Significantly, a majority of the 24 names contain G-d's Name, either in the original version (9 times) or containing an epithet, צור (3 times) or ש-ד-י (3 times). In their peculiar variations ("peace in G-d", "G-d is my Father", "G-d is my reward", "G-d has judged") the names indicate the close bond between every man and G-d.

The twelve leaders form a true elite as they help forge a nation inspired and permeated by its allegiance to G-d and His law. Their work was indispensable in alleviating Moshe's heavy burden and in spreading the knowledge of G-d and His Torah among the people. Indicative of their

importance is the wording "for Simeon", "for Yehuda", a. o. at the listing of their names. They were selected on the basis of their individual qualities as well as the trust that was placed in them. These men did not think of themselves as powerful rulers. They were conscious of their task to guide the people along the path that Moshe had charted in the Name of G-d and fully aware of the responsibility placed upon them.

The first chapters of Bamidbar contain language analogous to military concepts: the formation of units, appointments of leaders, marching orders, and camping assignments. This is certainly not meant to be a military "manual" but stresses the need for discipline and order on this epic journey through an inhospitable environment.

A detailed genealogical record of the tribal families points up the central role tradition places in the national structure as its most solid element. The spiritual and material heritage of the ancestors must continue to bear the impact of those who began the work without being able to complete it.

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