

Parashah Ninety-Seven

Numbers 1:1–2:13; Ezekiel 47:13–23; Luke 15:1–7

notes by Tim Hegg

HaShem—Bringing Us into His Abode

Our *parashah* this Shabbat begins the book of Numbers, בְּמִדְבָּר, *beMidmar*, “in the desert” (the first distinguishing word of the book). The desert of Sinai was not such a desert as to be entirely barren, for though the rain fall was not sufficient to sustain crops, it was enough to produce grazing lands for flocks and cattle.

Now the opening lines of *beMidmar* alert us primarily to the chronological sequence of the Torah. Adonai speaks to Moses “on the first day of the second month.” From the time of the exodus onward the Biblical text reckons the months according to the mandate that the month of the exodus (Nisan) should be counted as the first month (Ex 12:2). Thus, the second month would be Iyar. God speaks to Moses on Rosh Chodesh Iyar. According to Ex 40:17, the Tent of Meeting had been completed one month earlier, implying that the instructions of Leviticus (*v’Yikra*) with the exception of chapters 25-27 (which contain God’s speech to Moses while on Mt. Sinai) had been given in the intervening month. The first anniversary of the exodus had just occurred, and Israel had celebrated her second Pesach, the first one in remembrance of the exodus. Having been redeemed from Egypt and constituted as God’s nation, it was now time to organize and put in order the procedures which would assure an orderly progression to the Promised Land.

The text also alerts us to the fact that God spoke to Moses “in the Tent of Meeting.” The Torah teaches us that God’s voice regularly emanated from between the cherubim which flanked the Ark of the Covenant. In a way, then, the Tabernacle functioned as a portable Sinai, the holy and designated place from which HaShem would reveal His word and will. Even as Moses was permitted to ascend to the Presence of God on Sinai (Ex 19:20; 34:2) so it would appear that He was allowed to enter the Mishkan (Tabernacle) as well. In this capacity Moses foreshadows the Messiah Who would Himself have direct access to the Father, and would likewise reveal to the people the will of HaShem. In fact, the faithful discharge of duties by the Messiah in this regard is directly compared to Moses: Heb. 3:2 “He (i.e., Yeshua) was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all His house.” Only once was Moses unable to enter the Tent of Meeting, at the inauguration, for the Shekinah so overflowed the Most Holy Place that no one was able to enter any part of the Tabernacle (Ex 40:35). In this the Messiah is seen as greater than Moses, for the Messiah has dwelt in the very presence of the Father from all eternity (Ex 24:10-11; Mic 5:2; Jn 1:1; 16:28; 17:5; Phil 2:6).

God commands Moses to take a census of the whole nation, a census by clan, counting males 20 years old and older, but with the requirement that they be able to bear arms (which does not put an upper age limit on the census but an upper limit by means of strength or physical ability). The Sages ponder why HaShem would want a census. Rashi comments that it was because God loved Israel so much, He regularly wanted to count them (after they left Egypt, and after the sin of the golden calf, to see how many were left after the punishment, and here, upon embarking for the Promised Land). Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachmanides) suggests several reasons: 1) to demonstrate the miraculous growth of the nation (cf. Ex 1:5) and that HaShem is the God of life, 2) so that each individual family would be blessed as Moses and Aaron recorded their individual names, 3) to prepare for conquering the Promised Land (had they not sinned in the matter of the spies).

There may be a number of other reasons offered for the census, but at least one might be to begin gathering the necessary funds to support the Tabernacle and priesthood. Since the Tabernacle had just been finished, the half-shekel tax required at the taking of the census was now instituted in order to supply the necessary funds for the on-going maintenance and service of the Mishkan (Ex 30:12-16).

This need for the nation as a whole to maintain the service of the Tabernacle illustrates a biblical principle: redemption is entirely the work of HaShem while being set apart unto Him as a holy people is the cooperative work of HaShem and the redeemed. While slaves in Egypt, Israel was helpless to effect her own redemption. There is nothing she could have contributed to bring about her deliverance. Granted, she had to obey in the application of the blood upon the doorpost, etc., but this was not a contribution to her deliverance but an acceptance of what HaShem had provided—an act of faith whereby she claimed the promise of redemption through the sacrifice of the Pesach lamb.

But once Israel is redeemed from Egypt, it becomes a cooperation between herself and HaShem in the

matter of worship and being set apart unto Him as His chosen people. Beginning at Sinai they are required to maintain distance, forego sexual relations for a number of days, etc. When the instructions for the Tabernacle are given, the people are asked to bring all the materials for its construction, and even to participate in the making of the Tabernacle. The oil for the *menorah*, the flour for the bread of Presence, the ingredients for the incense, the materials for the *perochet*, the craftsmanship of the furniture—everything was supplied by the people. Not one item miraculously appeared as the direct contribution of HaShem. Once the Tabernacle was erected by the priests, then HaShem filled it with His glory, the only essential element of the whole which was not contributed by Israel herself.

What is the point? Our redemption (we could say justification) was in every detail the complete and singular work of HaShem on our behalf—we contributed nothing. Like the Israelites who simply applied the blood to the door of their dwelling, so we took what God alone provided in the offer of salvation and were delivered from the domain of darkness entirely by the might of His outstretched arm. But once redeemed, our walk with HaShem and our growing in holiness becomes a cooperation between the renewed soul and the Ruach Adonai (Spirit of God). We must supply the materials (if you will) in order to build a life fit for His dwelling. Of course, we do this entirely in His strength and by His ever-present leading. Yet we still do it. All of the imperatives of the Apostles exhorting us to walk in the Ruach, fight the good fight, put on the armor of God, put to death the deeds of the flesh, flee youthful lusts, etc., etc.—all of these are directed to the renewed will of the child of God, a will that is now able, by God’s strength, to choose what is righteous and shun that which is unrighteous. We are thus set apart (sanctified) unto God through the power and presence of His indwelling Ruach as we choose to obey His commands and walk in righteousness. It is a misunderstanding of Scripture and misapplication of biblical theology to think that our growth in holiness will be entirely God’s work as our redemption was. No, God expects His redeemed child to grow in holiness through a cooperative effort between Himself and the one He has recreated after His own image (Col 3:10). The very fact that we are able to grieve the Ruach (Eph 4:30) shows that our obedience to His designs for our holiness is essential for its realization.

The census itself raises a question: the total number given (1:46) of all the tribes (males 20 and up) was 603,550. This is exactly the same figure given in Ex 38:26 of the census taken just before the Tabernacle began to be constructed, some 7 months earlier. How is it possible that in 7 months the population remained exactly the same? Numbers of explanations have been offered, but none can be held dogmatically. Ramban (on Ex 30:12) notes that the Levites were most likely counted in the first census but were clearly excluded in this census, so that there was a fluctuation in population by way of deaths and births, but God miraculously brought the numbers to be equal in order to show Israel that He was able to sustain her regardless of the circumstances.

The *parashah* ends with the designation of tribes as to the position they occupy in the camp and as they set out on their journey. Each group of three tribes was designated a position relative to the Tabernacle as they set up camp. On the east was Judah, accompanied by Issachar and Zebulun. On the south was Reuben, accompanied by Simeon and Gad. On the west, Ephraim accompanied by Manasseh and Benjamin. And on the north, Dan, accompanied by Asher and Naphtali.

The Sages give this explanation: Judah is on the east, the place from which the light comes each day, for Judah is the tribe of the Messiah. Ramban designates Issachar as the tribe of the Torah since tradition says Issachar produced scribes. Zebulun was known as a tribe of wealth. Thus, Zebulun supports those who study Torah, and Torah leads to the Messiah. Reuben symbolizes repentance (Gen 35:22). Gad symbolizes strength while Simeon needed atonement. It was therefore fitting that Simeon be flanked by repentance and strength. Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin together represented strength, necessary for the harsh weather that enters the Land from the West. The strength represented by these tribes is a necessary companion to Torah (Judah) and repentance (Reuben). The north is symbolic of darkness, as is Dan, who allowed idolatry in the north under Jeroboam. To offset the darkness God gave Asher (known for olive oil) and Naftali, given a special blessing by Moses (cf. Deut 33:23). From an overall perspective, however, the most important point to emphasize in the physical arrangement of the tribes was that the Tabernacle, the place where God expressed His physical dwelling, was at the center. The rightful place of each tribe is in relationship to the Tabernacle. The presence of God was at the center of their very existence.

Our *haftarah* connects to the Torah *parashah* in an obvious way: even as Israel entered the Land to possess it as God’s granted inheritance to her, so regathered Israel, in the time of the Messianic reign, would return to the Land as her rightful inheritance. In Ezekiel’s vision, every tribe has its rightful place, with the tribe of Joseph receiving a double portion through his two sons (Ephraim and Menashah) whom

Jacob adopted. But there is an added dimension. Whereas in ancient Israel the foreigners who had attached themselves to Israel through faith in God had no inheritance in the Land, in the millennial kingdom, even they have a rightful inheritance among the tribes of Israel. This shows that it was always God's purpose to include His chosen ones from the nations as full citizens within the chosen people of Israel.

The Apostolic portion chosen for this *parashah* also has an obvious connection. The shepherd leaves the 99 sheep in order to find and rescue the one that is lost. Similarly, God, as the shepherd of Israel, will lose none. In the prophetic vision of regathered Israel, all are present—none are lost. All of God's chosen ones, whether from the descendants of Jacob, or those gathered from the nations, are united together in the Land as their rightful inheritance from the Father. This illustrates the words of our Master: "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day" (John 6:37).