

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Bamidbar
May 2026 / Iyar 5786

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Bamidbar – The glue that holds us all together

Sefer Bamidbar begins on a very positive note. Bnei Yisrael are all set to march triumphantly into the Promised Land. Indeed, when Moshe asks Yitro to join Bnei Yisrael, he implies that Bnei Yisrael are literally on their way “to the place about which Hashem said, ‘I will give it to you.’”¹ Unfortunately, events do not go as planned. Due to the sin of the meraglim, entry into the Land was delayed by forty years.

But let’s focus on the euphoric beginning of sefer Bamidbar. The first chapter of the sefer begins with a census of those who were fit to serve in the army, which was necessary for the planned upcoming entry into the Land. The second chapter contains a detailed description of the formation of the camp.

*The children of Israel shall encamp, each man by his own camp and each man by his division.*²

Bnei Yisrael were divided into four divisions and each division consisted of three tribes. The Leviim camped around the Mishkan which was placed in the centre of the tribes. Each tribe had their own flag, and each division had its own flag as well. In this way, everyone could recognize his place.

These fixed positions were maintained when the tribes were travelling as well as when they camped. Rashi³ explains that when the cloud lifted and started to depart, the Kohanim would sound the trumpets. The camp of Judah would set off first. The Leviim and the wagons carrying the Mishkan remained in the centre, the division of Judah was to the east, Reuven to the south, Ephraim to the west, and Dan to the north. It must have been a very impressive sight to behold!

Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky⁴ asks an insightful question and draws a powerful conclusion. He asks why the camp only adopts this formation at this point in the Torah. Why didn’t Bnei Yisrael march in formation with their tribal and divisional banners when they left Mitzrayim?

The question is strengthened when we realise that the tribal formation was already established by Yaakov Avinu when he instructed his sons as to how to carry his body when bringing him up for burial in Maarat Hamachpela in Chevron. Rashi⁵ explains:

“[The tribes were arranged] according to the sign their father Yaakov gave them when they carried him out of Mitzrayim, as it says, “His sons did for him just as he had commanded them” (Breishit 50:12), [That is,] Yehudah, Issachar, and Zevulun should bear his body from the east, Reuven, Shimon, and Gad from the south etc. as it states in the [Midrash] Tanchuma on this section.”

Rav Kamenetzky suggests that it is only at this point in time, after the Torah had been given and the Mishkan had been built, that it was appropriate to give each tribe their unique position and role. If too much emphasis had been placed on the tribal identities before the unifying effect of the Torah and the Mishkan, there was a real risk that the tribes would fracture into separate nations. When the Torah and the Mishkan became the centre and focal point of life, it was safe to give each tribe its unique position, flag and role. The Mishkan represents our Avodat Hashem and our unique calling amongst the nations of the world. And that is the glue that holds us all together as Am Yisrael.

¹ Bamidbar 10:29.

² Bamidbar 1:52.

³ In his commentary on Bamidbar 2:9.

⁴ “Emes l’Yaakov”, Bamidbar.

⁵ In his commentary on Bamidbar 2:2.

This message resonates powerfully today. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of disunity amongst the Jewish People, both on a national and individual level. He is too religious. She isn't religious enough. He is left. She is right. He refuses to serve in the army. She doesn't understand the importance of Torah study and the protection that it gives to the nation. He says tachanun on Yom Ha'atzmaut. He says Hallel with a bracha. She wears different clothing. There are plenty of reasons to be divided. Almost everyone agrees in theory as to the importance of unity, but we have to work very hard to achieve it.

Rav Kamenetzky's insight provides us with a clue as to how to achieve unity as a people. We each have our own role, our own tribe, our own style. But we can only afford to express this vital individuality when we have strengthened our unifying role via our avodat Hashem. The centre must always be the Mishkan, the Torah, avodat Hashem, the unique role of Am Yisrael in the world as Hashem's chosen people and as a light unto the nations. In other words, when we remember that we are first and foremost a people who are united in our common service of our Father, our King. Otherwise, there is a risk that our differences will lead to disunity. It is good to celebrate our different roles, backgrounds and strengths. But we can only do so safely when we are tied with a strong umbilical cord to the Torah and Hashem, the glue that holds us all together.

When we manage to maintain our unity despite our inherent differences, and when we are proud of our unique role in the world, the nations of the world respect us. But when we do not, then disunity creeps in. At that point, antisemitism becomes the paradoxical protection against the disappearance of Jewish identity. This idea has been expressed by many thinkers, from Theodor Herzl to Ibn Ezra⁶ to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks⁷. The prophets have taught us this principle on many occasions and history has testified to its truth.

How do we put this message into practice? For those who are not yet religious,⁸ they need to remember that authentic Torah Judaism, within the parameters of halacha, is the only force that will guarantee the survival and the success of the Jewish people. Even if one does not yet keep all of the intricacies of the Shulchan Aruch, one should recognise its significance and try to affiliate with authentic Jewish institutions. They need to remember that without the Torah, our Avodat Hashem, and our Divine mission, there is not much holding us together.

And for those blessed to be leading a religious life, reach out to those who are not, and do your best to welcome them back to the fold. We should remember the powerful words of the Chazon Ish⁹ who discusses the concept of a 'tinok shenishba' – a child captured and raised amongst non-Jews who does not have awareness of mitzvot and therefore cannot be held guilty for violating them. The Chazon Ish extends this concept to modern non-religious Jews who lack proper religious education and do not really understand what they are rejecting. Even those that have some basic understanding of halacha, we can assume that they do not truly understand what it means to live a Jewish life, and therefore they do not have the same status as a heretic. The Chazon Ish instructs us to draw them back with 'ropes of love' – showing them kindness, understanding and patience. In this way we will replicate Hashem's middah of loving-kindness and inspire a positive response.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the powerful message of Rav Kamenetzky. The best way for us to remain a unified people is to firmly place Hashem and His Torah in our centre.
2. If interacting with those who are less religious, remember the Chazon Ish's stirring words and try to play your part in bringing your brothers and sisters closer to Torah.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

* To subscribe please email darchai.noam@gmail.com

⁶ In his commentary to Devarim 28:65.

⁷ See for example his 2005 book "To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility", in particular the chapters dealing with the "dignity of difference" and antisemitism.

⁸ Who admittedly are probably not reading Darchai Noam.

⁹ In his commentary to Yoreh Deah 2:16 (which deals with the prohibition of slaughtering a mother animal and her offspring on the same day).