

PARSHAT BAMIDBAR

Is there a 'correct order' for the twelve tribes?
 Even though they are listed numerous times in Chumash,
 for some reason, each time their order seems to change!
 In the following shiur, we attempt to explain why their order
 changes so many times in Parshat Bamidbar.

PART ONE - THE ORDER OF THE SHVATIM

In Parshat Bamidbar, the "shvatim" [tribes] are listed in
 three different instances - when the Torah discusses:

- (A) The LEADERS (see 1:5-15);
- (B) The actual CENSUS of the shvatim (1:20-43);
- (C) Their ARRANGEMENT surrounding the Mishkan
 (see 2:1-31).

Based on these three sources, the following table compares
 the order of the shvatim in each respective list.

[A star *- next the name of a tribe will note a significant
 change from one list to the next:]

#	(A)	(B)	(C)
1)	Reuven	Reuven	*Yehuda
2)	Shimon	Shimon	*Yisachar
3)	Yehuda	*Gad	*Zevulun
4)	Yisachar	Yehuda	Reuven
5)	Zevulun	Yisachar	Shimon
6)	Ephraim	Zevulun	Gad
7)	Menashe	Ephraim	Ephraim
8)	Binyamin	Menashe	Menashe
9)	Dan	Binyamin	Binyamin
10)	Asher	Dan	Dan
11)	Gad	Asher	Asher
12)	Naftali	Naftali	Naftali

Review each of these lists, noting how (and where) the
 order changes from one list to the next. To understand why, we
 must first explain what each list is about.

MOTHERS FIRST

The first list - column (A) - appears to be the most logical.
 Note how the leaders of each tribe are presented:

- First - the children of Leah (eldest first),
- Then - the children of Rachel,
- Then - the children of the 'shfachot' (the maidservants)
 (Bilha & Zilpa).

The second list (when the census is taken) - column (B) - is
 almost identical, but with one very peculiar change: GAD has
 'moved up' from position #11 to position #3!

For no obvious reason, it appears as though Gad has been
 'adopted' by the children of Leah.

In the third list (when the shvatim are organized surrounding
 the Mishkan) - column (C) - we find once again that Gad is
 placed with "bnei Leah". However, this time we find yet another
 very peculiar change: The tribes of Yehuda, Yisachar, and
 Zevulun - the **youngest** children of Leah - have 'jumped' to the
 top of list (i.e. ahead of their older brothers Reuven and
 Shimon)!

Even though there is not obvious reason for this change, we
 should expect it to be significant, for this final list reflects the
 actual formation in which Bnei Yisrael travel through the desert
 on their journey to Eretz Canaan (see Bamidbar 10:13-28).

With this in mind, we will now attempt to explain the logic of
 this 're-organization' by considering the purpose of the Mishkan,
 and its strategic location within the camp of Bnei Yisrael.

DIVINE DIVISION

Recall God's original commandment to Bnei Yisrael
 concerning the purpose of the Mishkan:

"v'assu li MIKDASH v'shachanti b'TOCHAM"

"They shall make for a sanctuary that I may dwell
 AMONG THEM..." (see Shmot 25:8)

Note how this pasuk could be understood as a
 commandment as well - i.e. to erect the Mishkan in the CENTER
 of the camp.

Therefore, to enable this placement, the twelve tribes are
 divided into FOUR DIVISIONS. In this manner, the Mishkan will
 be surrounded equally in all four directions (East, South, West,
 and North) by groups of three tribes each. In other words, to
 create four 'divisions' from twelve tribes, the shvatim must be
 divided into four groups of THREE tribes each.

However, each group of three also requires a leader -
 therefore four leadership tribes must be chosen, one for each
 division.

Now we must explain which tribes are chosen to lead
 these four groups (and why)?

As family leadership is the responsibility of the "bechor" -
 the first born son - we find that the four leadership "shvatim" are
 simply the four sons of Yaakov who possess a certain aspect of
 being the 'first born' - namely: Reuven, Yehuda, Ephraim and
 Dan. Let's explain why.

REUVEN

Reuven was the first son born to Leah, therefore, his tribe
 obviously becomes one of the leaders.

YEHUDA

Recall from Sefer Breishit, that because of Reuven's sin
 (taking the maidservant of his father/ see Br. 35:22), Yaakov
 decided to award the family leadership to a different son. As
 Shimon & Levi had also angered their father (at the incident at
 Shechem/ see Br. 34:30), Yehuda was chosen as the family
 leader for the children of Leah.

[See also Yaakov's blessing to his children in 49:3-12 &
 Divrei Hayamim I 5:1-2!]

EFRAIM

Even though Leah was Yaakov's first wife to bear children,
 he still considered Rachel as his 'primary' wife. Therefore,
 Rachel's first child - Yosef - is also considered a "bechor". In
 fact, at his deathbed blessing to Yosef, Yaakov awards him with
 a 'double portion' - treating both Efraim and Menashe as tribes
 (see Breishit 48:5). However, at that same time, Yaakov also
 awarded the leadership (of Yosef's family) to Efraim instead of
 Menashe, as detailed in Breishit 48:17-19.

Hence, Efraim becomes the leadership tribe for the children
 of Rachel.

DAN

The children of the "shfachot" [maidservants] also
 became an integral part of Yaakov's family, and therefore, the
 firstborn of these children is also awarded the status of
 "bechora". Dan becomes the obvious choice, as he is the first
 born of Bilha, the "shifcha" of Rachel, the first maidservant to
 give Yaakov a child. [Note as well how the four leadership
 positions are divided equally between Yaakov's two wives:
 Rachel -2 (Efraim & Dan) and Leah -2 (Reuven & Yehuda).]

WHO BELONGS WITH EACH LEADER

Once these four leadership tribes have been designated,
 each must be joined by two additional tribes in order to form the
 necessary four groups of three.

Considering that these leaders are chosen based on the first born children of Yaakov's wives, it is only logical that each leader should be joined by his closest relatives.

Therefore:

* Reuven should be joined by Shimon and Levi, his two younger brothers. However, Levi has a 'new job' and must encamp in closer proximity to the Mishkan (see Bamidbar chapter 3). Thus, Reuven is joined only by Shimon and remains one tribe 'short'.

* To make Yehuda's group complete, he is joined by his two younger brothers: Yisachar and Zevulun.

* Efraim, the "bechor" of the 'house of Rachel', is joined by his brother Menashe, and his uncle Binyamin, (Rachel's youngest son). Thus, the group of "bnei Rachel" - is also complete.

* Dan should be the leader for all of children of the shfachot, i.e. his brother Naftali, and the two children of Zilpa: Gad and Asher. Note however, that Dan's group has one 'extra' tribe.

Considering that Reuven is 'short' one tribe and Dan has one too many, it is only logical that one of Dan's 'extras' moves to Reuven's group. For this reason, Gad 'moves' from his 'home camp' to join the camp of Reuven.

But why was specifically Gad chosen?

Naftali remains with Dan, for he is Dan's full brother.

Therefore, we are left to choose between Gad and Asher, the two children of Zilpa. One could suggest that Gad is chosen for he is the eldest son of Zilpa, and hence given the 'privilege' to 'upgrade' – to join the camp of Reuven, while his younger brother Asher remains with the camp of Dan.

HOW THEY TRAVELLED

Now that we have explained how and why the tribes are organized into four groups, we must explain the direction in which they travel (as detailed in Bamidbar 2:3,10,18,25):

EAST - Yehuda, Yisachar, and Zevulun [Bnei Leah]

SOUTH - Reuven, Shimon, and Gad [Bnei Leah +Gad]

WEST - Ephraim, Menashe, and Binyamin [Bnei Rachel]

NORTH - Dan, Naftali, and Asher [Bnei ha'Shfachot]

As Bnei Yisrael must now travel from Har Sinai (through the desert) toward Eretz Canaan, the basic direction of travel is eastward. Therefore the camp in the East travels first.

It would appear that Yehuda is chosen for this direction because of his leadership qualities. Recall that he was originally chosen by Yaakov for his leadership (he took responsibility for Binyamin), and later they are known for their strong army (see Yehoshua chapters 14->15).

The group of Reuven follows (to the south), as they are the other tribes from Leah. Efraim follows (to the west), as he leads the children of Rachel. Finally, the children of the "shfachot" (led by Dan) travel last.

With this background, we can now return to our original question and explain the logic behind the three conflicting orders of the shvatim:

LIST (A) - The Leaders

The presentation of tribal leaders (A) follows the most logical order: by mother/ by birth, i.e. the children of Leah - followed by the children of Rachel - followed by the children of the shfachot.

[For some reason, the children of the shfachot are not listed by the order of their birth. It seems that Naftali must always be last, and Asher precedes Gad for he will remain within the camp of "bnei ha'shfachot."]

LIST (B) - The Census

The census (B) follows basically the same order as (A), however it already reflects the 'transfer' of shevet Gad into the

camp of Reuven, placing him in the position of Levi (#3). Most likely, this is because this census will be the basis for the organization of the tribes into groups of three.

LIST (C) - Surrounding the Mishkan

The organization of the shvatim around the Mishkan (C) reflects not only Gad's new position within the camp of Reuven, but also Yehuda's leadership role in travel formation, for he is destined to be the leader of all the shvatim. [See Breishit 49:10 - "lo yasur shevet m'yudah..."] Therefore, this list begins with Yehuda, followed by the tribes of his camp, then Reuven and his camp, etc. etc.

Up until this point, our discussion has been rather technical. In Part II, we discuss this significance of this special manner by which the tribes encamped around the Mishkan.

PART TWO - WHEN AND WHY

The opening pasuk of Parshat Bamidbar informs us that this organization of the shvatim and the census took place on the first day of Iyar (in the second year, see 1:1). However, in the details of the Mishkan's dedication ceremony, as recorded Parshat Naso, we find an apparent contradiction. Let's explain.

Recall how Parshat Naso describes the dedication of the Mishkan with special korbanot offered by the "nsiim" [the tribal leaders], that took place during the first twelve days of Nisan (see 7:12-83). However, when you review that list of the "nsiim", you'll notice that their order is exactly the same as the order of list (C)!

This proves that the special order of the tribes (C) already existed on the first of Nisan, a month before the census was taken on the first of Iyar! This suggests that this order was already significant, even before Bnei Yisrael prepared for travel to Eretz Canaan!

To explain why, we must recognize that this special organization of the shvatim served a double purpose - both military and spiritual:

* **MILITARY** - To prepare the camp for travel in military order, in anticipation of their conquest of Eretz Canaan.

* **SPIRITUAL** - To emphasize to the entire nation that the Mishkan is located at the CENTER of the camp, in order that they recognize the God's SHCHINA dwells among them.

Let's explain why:

(1) The census in Parshat Bamidbar is of military nature, for it counted all the males above the age of twenty - "kol yotze tzava b'Yisrael" - because they will be fighting the battle to conquer Eretz Canaan (see 1:3).

Furthermore, the subsequent organization of the twelve tribes into four divisions, was also of a military nature. Finally, the census is taken on the first of Iyar, for only 20 days later Bnei Yisrael will actually leave Har Sinai (see 10:11) and begin their journey to conquer Eretz Canaan.

(2) One month earlier, when the Mishkan was dedicated, we find that this same order of the shvatim already existed. This implies that even before the census, the camp of Bnei Yisrael had already been organized in a manner so that the Mishkan would be located at its center. To do so, it was necessary to divide the twelve tribes into four groups of three, with each group flanking the Mishkan in a different direction.

This would imply that even when Bnei Yisrael were still encamped at Har Sinai, it was already important that they be reminded (by placing the Mishkan at the center) that God's presence was in their midst, and act accordingly.

THE SHCHINA RETURNS

To appreciate the additional importance of the location of the Mishkan at the center of the camp, we should also consider the events which took place after "chet ha'Egel" - the sin of the Golden Calf.

Recall that in response to "chet ha'Egel", God had instructed Bnei Yisrael to remove their 'crowns' that they had

received at Har Sinai (see Shmot 33:5-6), a sign that He is removing His shchina from their midst. For the very same reason, God then instructed Moshe to move his tent (the site where God speaks to Moshe) OUTSIDE the camp:

"And Moshe took the Tent, and pitched it OUTSIDE the camp, at a FAR DISTANCE from the camp, and called it 'OHHEL MOED', then whoever sought God would have to go to the 'Ohel Moed' located OUTSIDE the camp." (Shmot 33:7)

The very location of this "ohel moed" [tent of meeting] OUTSIDE the camp served as a constant reminder to Bnei Yisrael that God had removed His shchina from their midst. In order for His shchina to return, it was necessary for Bnei Yisrael to build the Mishkan:

"And they shall build for Me a Mishkan, and I will DWELL IN THEIR MIDST [v'shachanti b'TOCHAM]" (see Shmot 25:8)

Therefore, the re-organization of the camp of Bnei Yisrael in such a manner that the Mishkan is located at its center serves as a sign to the people that God has indeed returned His shchina to the camp.

Because of its significance, a 'remnant' of this camping arrangement of the tribes 'around the Mishkan' continued even after the forty years in the desert, when Bnei Yisrael finally conquer and settle the land.

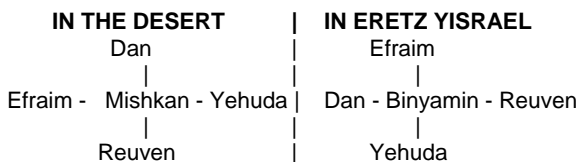
To explain how and why, we must consider the blessing of Moshe Rabeinu in Parshat v'Zot ha'Bracha to the tribe of Binyamin:

"And to Binyamin he said: "ydid Hashem -yishkon l'vetach alav..." [the dear tribe of God - upon whose territory His Presence will dwell...] (see Devarim 33:12).

For this reason, Chazal consider the tribe of Binyamin as "nachlat shchina" [the territory of God], for it is destined to house the Bet ha'Mikdash.

If so, then the following parallel emerges.

Recall from Sefer Yehoshua, that when the tribes receive their "nachalot" (as described in chapters 13->19), we find a very similar configuration!



Note how in both configurations the site of the SHCHINA - be it the Mishkan in the desert, or the Mikdash in "nachalat Binyamin" - is surrounded by the same four 'leadership' tribes! [The directions have simply rotated 90 degrees (and inverted).]

One could suggest that the Torah dedicates such minute detail to this manner of travel, to emphasize how the Mishkan serves this double purpose:

- 1) It acts as a symbol of God's presence within the camp of Israel (see Shmot 25:8 and above), and...
- 2) It functions as a constant reminder to Bnei Yisrael, as they travel, of their Divine purpose.

As Bnei Yisrael prepare their departure from Har Sinai towards the conquest of the Land of Israel, they will face new challenges. For example:

Can they translate what they have learned at Har Sinai into the norms of the daily life of a nation?

Will they be capable of fulfilling the mundane tasks of fighting battles, establishing a nation, and cultivating the land etc., while at the same time remaining on the spiritual level of Har Sinai?

This week, as we celebrate Yom Yerushalayim, this challenge takes on special significance. Can we, the nation of

Israel, continue our battle for Yerushalayim and the mundane chore of maintaining a secure and prosperous state, without compromising on the spiritual ideals of Har Sinai?

Can we maintain Yerushalayim not only as a unified capital city, but also as a city characterized by "tzedeq u'mishpat" (justice and righteousness)?

Although the Bet-Mikdash, the symbol of this challenge, was destroyed some two thousand years ago - both Parshat Bamidbar and Yom Yerushalayim can serve as a yearly reminder of this eternal challenge.

shabbat shalom,
menachem