



The Book of Bemidbar

Class #1

Rav Hanan Schlesinger

About us

*The **Community Kollel of Dallas** seeks to strengthen our Jewish community through the shared experience of Torah study in a non-judgmental environment. A unique combination of worldliness and Judaic scholarship makes the men & women of the Kollel wonderful ambassadors of Jewish living and learning in our modern society.*

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The Community Kollel of Dallas is an affiliate of the Center for the Jewish Future of Yeshiva University

The story of the setting up and dedication of the Tabernacle found at the very end of the book of Exodus turns out not to give the complete picture. Another component of what occurred at that time – the first day of the first month of the second year after leaving Egypt - is recorded in the book of Numbers, chapter 7. There we find that “on that day that Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle” the chieftains of the 12 tribes donated to the Tabernacle 6 carts and 12 draught oxen. They also brought dedication offerings for the alter of the Tabernacle consisting of precious vessels and animal offerings, and these God commanded be accepted “one chieftain each day”. There were of course 12 chieftains, one for each of the 12 tribes, so that we witness an elaborate 12 day dedication ceremony.

That means that that which is described in Numbers, if it is to be understood properly, must be seen in the narrative context set forth by the Book of Exodus.

And that’s not all. We coordinated between that which is described in Exodus and that which is described in Numbers not only as far as the human activity at the dedication of the Tabernacle, but also as far as the divine reaction to these human steps. Exodus 25 states that when the Tabernacle is complete, God will meet there with Moshe and speak to him from between the Cherubim that are over the cover of the Ark of the Covenant. However, at the very end of the Book of Exodus, in the description of the completion of the Tabernacle on the first day of the first month of the second year, it says explicitly that Moshe could not enter the Tabernacle because the cloud of the divine presence filled it and prevented Moshe from entering. And the first verse of the Book of Leviticus goes on to say that God called out to Moshe from the Tabernacle, while the latter had to remain outside! God did not meet there with Moshe! Clearly all is not yet as it is meant to be. The last verse of our chapter of Numbers, chapter 7, provides the consummation of the picture. There it says that after the gifts and offerings of the chieftains over the course of 12 days, that now “when Moshe went into the Tent of Meeting [the Tabernacle] to speak with Him, he would hear the Voice addressing him from above the cover that was on the top of the Ark of the Pact between the two cherubim”.



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Let us emphasize that in our class we did not yet grapple with the question of why is the content of chapter 7 where it is. Why is it not at the end of the Book of Exodus, and if it is already put off to another book, why in the 7th chapter and not the first.

But we did learn two very important points: First, we created a composite picture of what happened at the time of the Tabernacle's dedication. We put chapter 7 in its proper literary and historical context. Secondly, we learned something about the nature of this book that we call the Torah. It is an organically connected whole; one cannot take one book and attempt to understand it in a vacuum. Events that happened at one time are scattered over two non contiguous books of the Torah. You have to see the big picture, you have to keep in mind material from different places. This teaches us how to learn Torah, and in addition shows us that Torah's organizing principle, even in its historical sections, is not necessarily chronological. The material may not always be arranged in the order that events occurred, but perhaps thematically. Exodus is God's book. He calls all the shots. There is no human initiative, but only reaction to the divine will and to divine commandments. From the exodus to the receiving of the Torah to the construction of the Tabernacle, it is all about human subservience to God's plan and commands. The one place in the book where human beings take charge is ... the Golden Calf, for which of course nothing good can be said. The Book of Numbers on the other hand, introduces the concept of human initiative in the service of God. That might explain why the gifts and offering of the chieftains are not recorded until there.

Of course, that still does not explain why the description of the events of the first day of the first month of the second year are put off until the 7th chapter. Why does the Book of Bemidbar not commence with them? Well, we already said that chronology might not be the organizing principle. Perhaps we will find a thematic principle internal to Bemidbar that required the book to begin with something else! Stay tuned for our coming classes!



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Next time we will begin by seeing how Leviticus chapters 8 and 9 fit into the narrative we began working on in the first class (which we summarized above). Then we will bring Numbers chapter 9, verses 15-23 into the mix. Finally at the end we will hopefully cover Numbers chapter 9, verses 1-14.



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