

Parshat Bamidbar 5778

In Parshas Bamidbar, after Bnei Yisrael are counted Shevet by Shevet (but before Levi is counted), the Torah sets out the arrangement for encampment in the Midbar, as well as the order in which they journeyed (see diagram). It is surprising to note that, in setting this out, the Torah repeats the total count for each tribe – what is the reason for this repetition?

Abarbanel [1] explains that the Degalim and the order in which they journeyed were specifically arranged so that the right number of able-bodied men for any possible war would be available in the correct place. The most danger to any travelling procession occurs at the front of the procession. Many times, an enemy army will attack the travellers head-on. Therefore, in order to have adequate defence, the strongest and mightiest soldiers are usually placed there – the vanguard. For this reason, Degel Machane Yehuda was put at the front because it had a total of 186,400 men who could fight – the largest number of any of the Degalim.

The next most-dangerous place is at the rear of the travelling procession, where the enemy can sneak up from behind. For this reason, Degel Machane Dan was put at the rear, since they had the next largest total of fighting men - 157,600.

The two other Degalim are neither at the front nor the rear, and thus are less prone to attack. Consequently, these Degalim – Reuven and Efraim – had 151,450 and 108,000 respectively. Thus, according to Abarbanel, the specific number and placement of the tribes in the Degalim was for the purposes of military strategy.

However this begs the question – how were the Shevatim to be divided into the Degalim in the first place? The Medrash in Bamidbar Rabbah [2] describes that when Hashem instructed Moshe to organise the Degalim, Moshe worried that this would be a cause of future machlokes between the tribes. The Alshich points out that there were two parts to this potential jealousy which may have arisen –

a) Intra-Degalim - those Shevatim who became subsumed under the title of the main Shevet in the Degel – for example, Yisachar being jealous of Yehuda.

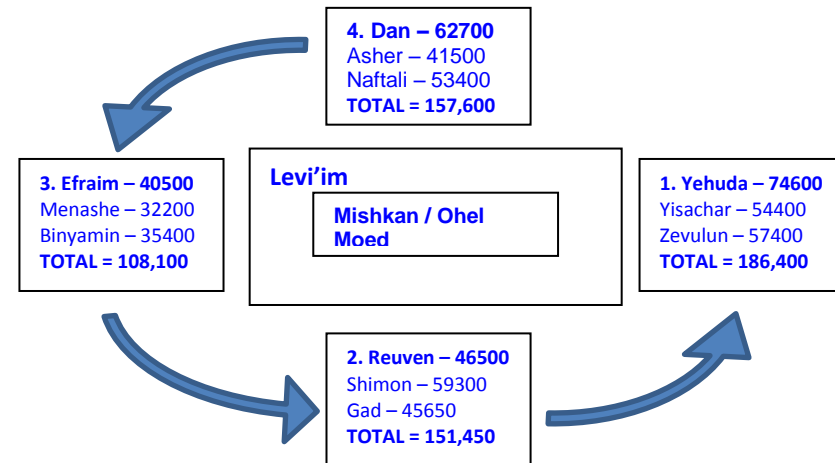
b) Inter-Degalim – jealousy in one Degel of another Degel which travelled before them.

To prevent Intra-Degalim jealousy, the pasuk says “Each man according to his Degel with symbols” – the Alshich explains that each tribe had their own flag, coloured according to the colour of the stone of that tribe in the Choshen, and emblazoned with a symbol particular to that tribe. If, despite this, certain tribes still felt negated by being referred to as the Degel of the overarching tribe, the pasuk says that they camped “According to the house of their fathers”. What does this mean? The Shevatim already knew from centuries beforehand how and where to group themselves. Ya’akov had given the Shevatim strict instructions on

how to bear his coffin from Mitzraim to Meoras Hamachpelah for burial. That same arrangement was the one which the Shevatim would adopt now. Therefore, there would be no argument – Hashem told Moshe he should not worry.

With regard to the Inter-Degalim jealousy, the pasuk says “And their encampment” about Yehuda the “first” Degel – as if to say, they are not more important, but rather, it is as if they are only an addition to the other Degalim. Similarly, the pasuk describes the encampment of Dan, the rear-most Degel, using the phrase “they should journey according to their Degalim”. In other words, although Dan was the last Degel to travel, all of the Degalim are considered to be included within Dan. Thus none of the Degalim was considered by its position to be any more or less important than the others.

But, what was the reason for the sudden instruction for encampment? Where did this idea of camping around the Levi'im who in turn camped around the Mishkan come from? There is a pasuk in Shir Hashirim which says “Heviani el beis hayayin veDiglo alai ahava” – this refers to Matan Torah, where, according to the Kli Yakar [3], Bnei Yisrael saw the Degalim of the Angels around the Kisei Hakavod. They desired to emulate this, and Hashem therefore commanded Moshe to organise the Degalim. However Shir Hashirim Rabbah [4] interprets this pasuk to mean that at Har Sinai, we received the banners of Torah, Mitzvos and Maasim Tovim. May we use this Shabbos and Shavuos, and indeed every other day of the year, to appreciate the gift of the Torah and reconnect through Torah to strengthen our relationships Bein Adom LeMakom, Lechaveiro and LeAtzmo.



[1] Abarbanel on Bamidbar 2:1

[2] Bemidbar Rabbah 2: 8

[3] Kli Yakar Bamidbar 2:1; also Kitzur Ba'al Haturim Bamidbar 2:3, Rabbeinu Bachye, Bamidbar 2:1-3

[4] Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2:4