

# Our Children—Our Future

Category: Bamidbar, Bamidbar

*Of all the Jewish people, only the Levite babies are counted in a census. Why so? And how does it connect to Shavuot?*

## The Child's Wish

Good Shabbos!

In Israel, there is an organization called Rachshei Lev. This organization helps children with serious illnesses (*rachmanah litzlan*) and their families.

Among the things that they do are to realize these precious children's dreams, similar to what the Make a Wish Foundation does in the United States.

There was a ten-year-old girl named Emily who had been battling a serious illness for seven years when the following happened. Her dream had always been to meet presidents and leaders of countries, and in her lifetime, she had already met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Reuven Rivlin, among other world leaders.

So when Emily heard that U.S. President Donald Trump was coming to visit Israel, she approached Rachshei Lev and asked them to make her dream come true and arrange for her to meet the President. Rachshei Lev staff in turn called White House staff coordinating the visit to Israel, and those staffers responded at the first opportunity and authorized the meeting. They even prepared a special invitation for her.

So when Donald Trump visited Israel and visited Yad Vashem, Emily was invited to be there, too. Immediately after the official memorial service at Yad Vashem, the President was ushered into a side room, where young Emily had another dream come true.

People who were present in the room reported that it was a very emotional encounter. President Trump expressed interest in her medical condition and shared with her his job as President. In turn, Emily shared a picture she had

especially drawn for the President.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

## The Levite's Census

In this week's Parshah, we learn about the importance of children. This week, we started reading the Book of Bamidbar, which is also known as "Chumash HaPekudim" because right at its start, G-d commands Moshe Rabbeinu to count all the menfolk "from 20 years old and up; all who go out in the army among Israel shall be counted by their legions" (Bamidbar 1:3). In other words, to take a census of anyone suitable to be drafted into the military.

But the Rebbe asks, why would they need an army in the desert when they already had the Ananei HaKavod, the Clouds of Glory, smoothing everything out in front of them? They had no wars or battles to fight!

Rather, the Rebbe explains, when the enemy knows that you have a strong military, then they don't start with you in the first place. And so G-d wanted everyone in the Middle East to know that the Hebrew army numbered "603,550" (Bamidbar 1:46) (Toras Menachem 5714, Vol. II, pg. 279).

But then comes an interesting command. "But the Tribe of Levi, do not count... among the Sons of Israel" (Bamidbar 1:49). G-d commanded Moshe to not take a census of the Levites as part of the Jewish military. Why so? Because they were not drafted into the military—they had a special mission assigned to them.

What was that? They "shall carry the Mishkan... and they shall serve it, and encamp around the Mishkan; and when the Mishkan travels, the Levites shall take it down, and the Mishkan camps, the Levites shall erect it" (Bamidbar 1:7).

The Leviim had two missions: They were the guardians of the Mishkan, seeing to it that no stranger shall draw close to places an ordinary Jew is forbidden to enter; and they were also responsible for erecting and dismantling the mishkan and transporting it throughout all the years in the desert. And so they were not conscripted into the regular army; they had this special mission reserved for them.

But then, as the Parshah continues, G-d commands Moshe: "Count the sons of

Levi... every male from one month old and up shall they be counted” (Bamidbar 1:15).

Now, counting every Levi infant one month old and up is something that makes no sense. It’s one thing to conduct a separate census of them, because they have a separate mission—they’re not part of the army. But counting babies from one month old? Can a baby take apart or assemble the Mishkan? Why exactly would you need to “count” him?

So seemingly, you would have had to count them from an age higher than the age at which the rest of the Jewish People were counted. After all, recruits for the army were drafted from age 20 and up, while the Leviim served from “age 30 and up until age 50; all who came to serve, to perform labor in the Tent of Meeting” (Bamidbar 4:3).

Rather, explains the Rebbe, the Leviim had an additional mission. The Torah tells us,

“And the Levites camped around the Mishkan of Testimony... and the Levites guarded the Mishkan’s watch” (Bamidbar 1:33). Now, the way in which the Leviim guarded the Mishkan was not by standing at the gates bearing weapons, not letting any foreign party enter. Rather, by virtue of their very camping around the Mishkan, they formed a human fence and thus automatically, no one could enter the Mishkan.

And for that, you didn’t need to be an adult. Instead, the families of the Leviim who camped around the Mishkan—men, women and children—all acted as guards of the Mishkan. In the very fact that they pitched their tents and lived around the Mishkan, they became the guards of the Mishkan—every individual inside each individual tent, regardless of his age, was a guard of the Mishkan. As Rashi says, “From one month old and up... they were appointed to be called a guard of the holy watch” (Bamidbar 3:15).

## **The Most Important Mission**

So now we can ask the question: What was inside the Mishkan that was so important that an entire Tribe was appointed as guards over it? The Ramban (Nachmanides) says in the Torah portion of Terumah: “The primary object in the

Mishkan was the Aron”—the Ark in which they placed the Tablets of the Covenant and the Torah scroll next to them; that was the essence of the Mishkan and it was that that the Sons of Levi guarded. It thus emerges that the babies of the Tribe of Levi were the very guardians of the Torah.”

My friends, the holiday of Shavuos is upon us. And the Midrash (Shir HaShirim Rabbah) tells us that when G-d chose to give the Torah to the Jewish Nation, He asked, “Who shall be the guarantors upon whom we can rely that the Torah will be maintained so that it is not forgotten?”

At first, the Jewish Nation offered the rabbis, who will study the Torah for everyone. “Our Prophets will be guarantors for us,” they said. But G-d didn’t accept that. And so they offered the elders: “Our fathers will be guarantors for us”—meaning, those who have already retired and who go to shul and join a Torah class between Mincha and Maariv. But those, too, were not accepted. So ultimately, the Jewish Nation said, “Our children will be guarantors for us”—our kids will be the guardians of the holy watch; they will study the Torah and they will pass it to the next generation of kids (Likutei Sichos, Vol. II, pg. 571).

And so the Rebbe encouraged children to come hear the Ten Commandments in shul on Shavuos—because they are the guarantors and guardians of the Torah. And the Rebbe asked that even days-old babies be present during the reading of the Ten Commandments.

## **Babies, Too!**

Some will argue that it’s one thing to bring kids who are six or seven years old to shul, because at least they are capable of listening and even understanding a bit of what the Ten Commandments says. But why bring babies to shul when they will only make noise and bother the adults from hearing the Ten Commandments? The gain is canceled out by the loss!

So the Mishnah (Ethics of the Fathers 2:8) tells us about Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai, who was the leader of the Jewish Nation during the era of the Destruction of the Second Temple: “He had five disciples.” Now obviously, he had thousands of students. But it was those specific five who became the leaders of the next generation; “and he would enumerate their praises.”

And so, regarding Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yochanan would say: “A cemented pit that does not lose a drop”—meaning that he had a phenomenal memory. He remembered everything that he learned or read. With regards to another student with a similar name, Rabbi Elazar, Rabbi Yochanan would say: “Like an overpowering wellspring”—a very brainstorming man whose mind was constantly flowing and innovating. And then, on the third disciple, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Yochanan would say, “Happy is the one who bore him!” Now, what kind of compliment is this for a prominent rabbi, that we praise his mother?

So the Talmud Yerushalmi tells us that one of the Sages of that generation, Rabbi Dosa Ben Hurkinus, informed the Sages of Israel about the birth circumstances of Rabbi Yehoshua: “I remember how his mother would bring his carriage to the synagogue so that the words of Torah would be stuck in his ears” (Yerushalmi, Tractate Yevamos 1:6). So Rabbi Yehoshua’s mother would bring in the stroller to the study hall while he was still an infant so that he’d hear Torah being studied.

So Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai, when he wanted to praise Rabbi Yehoshua, would say, “Happy is the one who bore him”—meaning that the entire greatness of Rabbi Yehoshua in Torah was in the merit of the fact that his mother would take him to the study hall while he was still a baby.

And so we learn from this, the Rebbe says, that when a tiny Jewish child hears the Ten Commandments, it becomes engraved in his soul just as he is gaining self-awareness, and it will influence him for the rest of his life.

And so, my friends, you’re all cordially invited to bring our “little guards” to shul this Shavuot to hear the reading of the Ten Commandments.

Good Shabbos!