

Parashat Bamidbar 5771, 2011

“Know Before Whom You Stand”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The L-rd spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting on the first day of the second month, in the second year after the exodus from the land of Egypt, saying... (*Sefer Bamidbar* 1:1, this, and all Bible translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*)

At first glance, the above-cited verse appears to be a rather standard prologue to *Sefer Bamidbar* and to our *parasha*. It seems to serve a very utilitarian purpose in the sense that it sets the stage for the events that are yet to unfold. I believe, however, that a careful rather than a cursory reading of our *pasuk* (verse) is in order, since in my estimation it hides far more than it reveals. Moreover, upon due analysis, our verse appears to be both overly specific and redundant. The “short form” could have been written: “The L-rd spoke to Moses, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after the exodus from the land of Egypt, ” – everything else seems to be a repetition of previously stated and well-known material. If that is the case, why does the Torah seem to write more than is necessary?

To elaborate upon my question: Beyond a shadow of a doubt, we know that G-d’s act of speaking with Moshe at this time took place “in the Sinai Desert,” since the final verse in *Sefer Vayikra* (the previous book of the Torah) concludes: “These are the commandments that the L-rd commanded Moses to [tell] the children of Israel on Mount Sinai” (27:34) – and Mount Sinai is, of course, in the Sinai Desert. In fact, from the moment of our

people's departure from Egypt, until their entrance into Israel some 40 years later, they were almost always in some part of the Sinai Desert. If that is the case, why does the Torah find it important enough to restate this location? The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) was also troubled by the Torah's use of the phrase "in the Sinai Desert." His rationale for its inclusion speaks to the census that Moshe was about to undertake:

[Why does the Torah use the phrase "in the Sinai Desert" when it is ostensibly superfluous to do so?] This comes to tell us that the Jewish people did not leave that specific area until they were counted... (All translations and brackets my own)

Thus, while the phrase "in the Sinai Desert," is problematic, the Ramban suggests that the Torah utilized it to teach us that here, and here only, were the Jewish people to be counted.

The expression, "in the Tent of Meeting," seems to be equally unnecessary, since we know that all communications between G-d and Moshe, from the beginning of *Sefer Vayikra*, took place in the Tent of Meeting. If so, why was it included? Here, too, the Ramban serves as our guide and teacher:

Since the Torah focused upon the commandments of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, and explicitly tells us that they were stipulated at Mount Sinai, it now comes to reiterate and teach us here that this communication [regarding the census] was issued in the Tent of Meeting – like all other communications that are mentioned from the beginning of *Sefer Vayikra*. So, too, will it be in the future in each and every communication from G-d to Moshe, that they will take place in the Tent of Meeting. Since the moment that the Tent of Meeting was erected, and Hashem [initially] spoke to him [Moshe] from there, He continued to do so solely from there.

The Ramban's explanation for the dual-level expression "in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting" is clear, direct, and to the point. Nonetheless, the sheer number of identifiers that appear in this one small *pasuk* seems to beg an explanation. By way of review, we are told:

1. Who spoke to who: G-d to Moshe

2. Where in general: in the Sinai Desert
3. Where in particular: in the Tent of Meeting
4. When regarding the calendar year: on the first day of second month
5. When historically: in the second year following the Exodus from Egypt

What was the Torah trying to teach us by stating all of these markers of location and time? In my estimation, the Torah employs general and specific references focusing upon both location and time in order to provide a fixed and explicit context for future events, and thereby anchor the Jewish people in this unique existential moment. This sets the stage for us to achieve G-d-consciousness, i.e. the ability to sense the immanence of G-d's divine presence. Once we are cognizant of our time and place in the great chain of Jewish historical being, we are ready to encounter our Creator. On a certain level, I believe this is what Rabbi Eliezer Hagadol meant when he declared: "*Da lifnei mi atah omeid*" ("Know before Whom you stand," *Otzar Hamidrashim*, Eisenstein, s.v. *Eliezer*, 18). "Know," in this instance, refers to an abiding sense of self-awareness and watchfulness that allows the Jew to step beyond his day-to-day limitations and reach out to the Almighty. This is possible if and only if one knows where he has been (history), where he is (present), and where he is going (future). This, then, is perhaps why the Torah was so exact in our verse in its communication of the time and place of G-d's revelation to *Moshe Rabbeinu* (Moshe our Teacher).

May it be it the will of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He), and our fervent desire, that we ever strive to know our place, in the past, present, and future of the Jewish people. Then, with His help, we will be able to exceed our everyday selves and stand ready to know before Whom we stand. As *Shlomo Hamelech* (King Solomon) so

beautifully stated: “Know Him in all your ways, and He will direct your paths.” (*Sefer Mishle* 3:6) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

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<http://reparashathavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdbe718@gmail.com.