

January 13, 2019 - Num. 2:1-34 - Arrangement of the Camp

Torah Reading: Numbers 2:1-34

Psalm 91

Haftarah: Isaiah 55:13 – 56:8

Isaiah 8:18

Israel Encamped in the Wilderness

This description of Israel encamped in the wilderness is a shadow of the constellations arrayed in the heavens, and of the 144,000 - the host of believers encircling the Throne of the 'Lamb that was slain' in the Book of Revelation. The rabbis saw it as a dance in which Israel rejoiced in her forgiveness, and where the banners helped everyone know their place in the world and in the Spirit.

The "banners" reminded them of the love of the Bridegroom for the Bride in the Song of Solomon.

Numbers 2:1-2 - "And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, Every man of the children of Israel shall pitch by his own standard, with the ensign of their father's house: far off about the tabernacle of the congregation shall they pitch."

Rashi - The color of each one was like the hue of its stone, set in the *choshen* [worn by the Kohen Gadol], and in this way, everyone could recognize his division. Another explanation: "with the signs [the literal translation of בְּאֵתוֹת] of his fathers' house" — according to the sign their father Jacob gave them when they carried him out of Egypt, as it says, "His sons did for him just as he had commanded them" (**Genesis 50:12**), [which was that] Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun should bear him [his body] from the east, Reuben, Simeon, and Gad from the south etc. as it states in the [Midrash] Tanchuma on this section.

The tribes had it clearly arranged at their father Jacobs's death-bed how they should take up their respective positions when they should go out to bury him. The sons should prepare everything and follow him to his grave in the manner following: Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun should take up their position on the east; Reuben, Simeon, and Gad on the south; Asher and Naphtali on the north. Joseph should not carry the corpse (therefore his sons were permitted to do so), for he was a king and they must pay him deference. Levi should not carry the coffin, for he was destined to carry the Ark of God and to be separated for holiness. "And," said Jacob, "as I now arrange with you as to your respective positions at my burial, so shall it be arranged when the Lord causes his Shechinah to dwell in the midst of you in your journey with your flags." - (Bemidbar Rabba, commentary on Numbers)

The Banners

"standard" = *degel* - banner, flag, standard, sign, something conspicuous.

There were four banners - under which three tribes were stationed. Each tribe also had

a banner, with a sign or marking on it which distinguished each tribe.

Aben Ezra observes that the ancients used to say that there was in the standard of Reuben the form of a man, on account of the mandrakes, **Genesis 30:14**; and in the standard of Judah the form of a lion, because Jacob compared him to one, **Genesis 49:9**; and in the standard of Ephraim the form of an ox, from the sense of those words, the firstling of his bullock, **Deuteronomy 33:17**; and in the standard of Dan the form of an eagle, so that they might be like the cherubim the prophet Ezekiel saw, **Ezekiel 1:10**.

Rashi says the color of the banners corresponded to the color of the precious stone on the High Priest's breastplate that represented each tribe (**Exodus 28:17-21**).

Others propose these signs were the signs of the zodiac or Mazzaroth, a correspondence originally put forth by Joseph, who equated his brothers with stars (constellations):

- **Genesis 37:9** - "And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me."

In fact, there is a foreshadowing of the curse on generation of the wilderness in Joseph's story:

- **Genesis 37:22** - "And Reuben said unto them, Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness (*bamidbar*)..." "*Bamidbar* - "in the wilderness" - the name of the Book of Numbers.

Now the generation made up of all the tribes who cast him in, along with his own children, would perish for their rebellion.

The encampment of Israel, then, would reflect the constellations in the Heavens, revolving around the Tabernacle, which itself was a reflection of Christ as a living body.

Compare **Revelation 5:5** - "Then I saw a Lamb who appeared to have been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders."

- **Revelation 4:6-7** - "In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, covered with eyes in front and back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second like a calf, the third had a face like a man, and the fourth was like an eagle in flight."

It is said (*Bemidbar Rabba*, sect. 2. fol. 178. 2.) Judah's stone was the "nophech" (which we render an emerald), and his flag was colored in the likeness of the color of the heavens, and there was formed upon it a lion. Issachar's was the sapphire, and his flag was colored black, like to black lead, and there were framed upon it the sun and moon, on account of what is said in **1 Chronicles 12:32**. Zebulun's was a diamond, and his flag was colored white, and there was formed upon it a ship, because of what is said in

Genesis 49:13.

Joseph's stone is the onyx or sardonyx, and his flag was colored very black, and on it were figured for the two princes, Ephraim and Manasseh, Egypt, because they were born in Egypt; and upon the flag of Ephraim was figured an ox, because of what is said in **Deuteronomy 33:17**; and on the flag of the tribe of Manasseh was figured an unicorn, because of what is said in the same place. Benjamin's stone was the jasper, and his flag was colored like to twelve colors, and on it was figured a wolf, because of what is said **Genesis 49:27**.

Dan's stone was the "ligure", and his flag was colored like to a sapphire, and there was figured upon it a serpent, on account of what is said **Genesis 49:17**; Asher's stone was the "tarshish" or beryl, and his flag was colored like to a precious stone, with which women adorn themselves, and on it was figured an olive tree, on account of what is said **Genesis 49:20**. Naphtali's stone was the amethyst, and his flag was colored like to clear wine, whose redness is not strong, and on it was figured an hind, on account of what is said of him **Genesis 49:21**

- *Gill's Exposition*

An alternative explanation: The Targum of Palestine assigns to Judea the lion, but to Reuben a stag, to Ephraim a young man, and to Dan a basilisk serpent.

See also **Song of Solomon 2:4** - "He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner (*degel*) over me was love."

The word for love there is '*ahabah* - romantic love. Used by the Queen of Sheba in **1 Kings 10:9** - "...because the LORD loved Israel for ever, therefore made he thee king, to do judgment and justice."

The "banner" - the self-identifying sign - of God is the love of the Bridegroom for the Bride.

Rashi - "far off about the tabernacle": At a distance of a mile (or possibly a half-mile), as it is stated in **Joshua 3:4**, "However, there shall be some distance between you and it; about two thousand cubits." [The reason for this distance, which is the distance permitted to travel on a Sabbath day, was] so that they would be able to come [to the *Mishkan*] on the Sabbath, [for] Moses, Aaron and his sons, and the Levites were encamped close to it.

This would leave room for the Levites to encamp close around the Tabernacle, and to discourage other Israelites from being tempted to approach too close and possibly defile the grounds.

Numbers 1:3 - "And on the east side toward the rising of the sun shall they of the standard of the camp of Judah pitch throughout their armies: and Nahshon the son of Amminadab shall be captain of the children of Judah."

"east" = *qedem* - east, front

Rashi - The front side, which is called דָּקָה , and which is this? The east side. The west is called the rear side [of the world].

Numbers 2:9 - "All that were numbered in the camp of Judah were an hundred thousand and fourscore thousand and six thousand and four hundred, throughout their armies. These shall first set forth."

Rashi - "these shall journey first": When the cloud was seen departing, the kohanim would sound the trumpets, and the camp of Judah would set off first. And when they traveled, they journeyed forward retaining the same positions in which they camped: the Levites and the wagons in the center, the division of Judah to the east, that of Reuben to the south, that of Ephraim to the west, and that of Dan to the north.

This order is emphasized in **verse 17** - "...as they encamp, so shall they set forward, every man in his place by their standards."

Judah would lead since it was the most numerous, but also because the Messiah "the Lion of the Tribe of Judah" would descend from it (**Genesis 49:10**). Nahshon the captain of Judah appears in the geneology of Jesus (**Matthew 1:4; Luke 3:32, 33**).

Numbers 2:33 - "But the Levites were not numbered among the children of Israel; as the LORD commanded Moses."

Levi's stone, as the Jews say (Bemidbar Rabba, sect. 2. fol. 178. 2.), was the carbuncle, and his flag was colored, a third part white, and a third part black, and a third part red, and on it were formed Urim and Thummim.

This verse, and this whole description of the arrangement of Israel's encampment, turns our thoughts again to the doom of that generation that will fall in the wilderness - despite their venerable history and descent from the Patriarchs - a lineage that is emphasized and highlighted by description of their flags and banners.

Natural lineage means little in the economy of God - spiritual faith and obedience count for everything. Although Jesus' geneology through both Mary and Joseph are listed, He was born of a virgin, and his conception was spiritual - the Holy Spirit overshadowed her.

John the Baptist warned:

- **Matthew 3:9** - "And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham."

The Patriarchs and the Children of Israel existed only to provide a lineage through which the Messiah would come. To be part of that lineage and not to recognize Him is

both a betrayal and a tragedy.

The generation of the wilderness serve as a picture of that - they rebelled and failed to trust God, and their carcasses were strewn in the wilderness, as a warning - for our admonition and instruction.

The Spiritual Numbering of Believers in Revelation

This numbering and arrangement of Israel is mirrored in the Book of Revelation, with a mystical number of 144,000 standing in for an actual head count of believers throughout history.

Then John widens his view and describes a multitude that could not be numbered at all.

- **Revelation 7:4-8** - "And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel. Of the tribe of Judah were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Reuben were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Gad were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Aser were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Nephthalim were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Manasses were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Simeon were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Levi were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Issachar were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Zabulon were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Joseph were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Benjamin were sealed twelve thousand.

- **Revelation 7:9** - "After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands"

"Now this encampment of the people of Israel was an emblem of the form and order of the spiritual Israel or church of God, under the Gospel dispensation. Christ in human nature is the tabernacle, who is in the midst of his people by his gracious presence; as the heart and life of the congregation of his saints, in whom they all center and terminate, and where he sits enthroned as King; and as the Levites encamped in four squadrons next to the tabernacle, all around it, to these answer the living creatures in **Ezekiel 1:5**; which design the ministers of the word, who are in the highest place in the church, between Christ and the congregation, and are near to him, to be supplied by him; then encamped the whole body of the people of Israel by their standards, with their ensigns, to whom answer the wheels in **Ezekiel 1:15**; and the twenty four elders in Revelation 4:4; all which show the church to be militant, and that there is an order in Gospel churches, which makes them both comely and terrible, **Song of Solomon 6:4**; and may teach every member to abide by his standard, and follow his ensign and ensign bearer, **Isaiah 11:10**."

- *Gill's Exposition*

Alternately, the four living creatures, as shown above, are not the Levites, but the four designations of Israel encamped around the Tabernacle. The Levites then would

correspond to the Angels ministering to God in heaven - God has made his ministers a flaming fire.

Another Word About Numbering

(Insights from "Bewilderments" by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg)

When God says, "Take ye the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel," the text uses the phrase "nasa ro'sh" meaning "lift up the head." The midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah, 1:9) explains: "If they are worthy, let them rise higher" - as we see [as Joseph told the butler], "Pharoah will lift up your head and restore you to your position." But if they are unworthy, they will all die, as we see in the same story, "Pharoah will lift your head from off you and hang you upon the gallows." (**Genesis 40:13.19**)

That's why numbering "by their polls / heads" bestows honor on the individual, but always with the requirement of enduring, and persevering in faith.

In addition, God's promise to make Israel "like the sands of the sea" promises power and success, but at the same time, invokes humility, since each member is reduced to the tiniest speck, seemingly lost among an innumerable multitude. Even the phrase "as the stars for multitude" has an undertow of melancholy for our natural identity. Lost in the cold galaxy, we have meaning only as we continue to dance to God's music and not to our own.

But we have this promise:

- **Isaiah 40:26** - "Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth."

Just as sand, if it gets into food, destroys the teeth, so if you touch Israel you will bring down calamity upon yourself. Just as sand going through fire becomes converted from a dull substance to a clear glass, so Israel going through the fire of persecution comes out brighter and clearer. Moreover, other nations are compared to lime (**Isaiah 33:12**) and Israel to sand. As one can not build with lime unless it is mixed with sand, so the nations can not exist or flourish without Israel in the midst of them.

The Israelites are compared to stars, to dust, and to sand. There was a man who was efficient in three different handicrafts, a goldsmith, a potter, and a glassblower. Those who respected him alluded to him as the goldsmith; those who were indifferent to him called him the glassblower; and those who had contempt for him named him "the potter." Thus Moses, who loved his flock, calls them (**Deuteronomy 1:10**) "the stars of heaven"; Hosea, who was indifferent to them, speaks of them as "the sand on the seashore"; and Balaam, who was their enemy, calls them "the dust of Jacob."

Flags, Banners and the 'Dance of the Camps'

The rabbis associate this array of banners with Song of Solomon:

See **Numbers 2:2** - "Every man of the children of Israel shall pitch by his own standard, with the ensign of their father's house: far off about the tabernacle of the congregation shall they pitch."

- **Song of Solomon 6:10** - "Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?"

As said above, the Bridegroom's "banner" over his Bride is love.

In the midrash, Israel says to the nations: "How will you 'look upon' the Shulamite? What grandeur can you give us? Can you give us the grandeur of the dance of the camps, such as God gave us in the wilderness, a flag for each tribe... when we sinned and He forgave us and told us, 'Let your camp be holy?'"

"Even Balaam looked at them with resentment because he could not touch them, as it is said, 'And Balaam lifted up his eyes...' (**Numbers 24:2**): this refers to the flags. He began speaking, 'Who can touch these people, who know their fathers and their families,' as it is said, 'who dwell according to their tribes.' From here we learn that the flags (*degalim*) were grandeur (*gedulah*) and separation (*geder*) for Israel. That is why it is said, "Each man by his flag."

Israel arrayed in the camp around the Tabernacle, each man by his flag, means they had a solid sense of their identity. They knew who they were, their relation to God, their lineage and heritage, and their relation to one another. They were confident of their place in the natural world and in the spiritual world. Because of this they were able to trust and be trusted.

"who know their fathers" - means they were reminded that their fathers left off serving idols.

"We sinned and he forgave us" the midrash says.

Here the midrash uses one of several Rabbinic Hebrew words for forgiveness: *machal* = forgive - has the same three letter as salt - *melach*. Salt reminds us of the sin offerings in the Temple as well as to preserve, withstanding the passage of time.

It also means to empty something out, thus to forgo the right to exact punishment. It appears in the Bible only in the name of Esau's wife Machalath (**Genesis 28:9**).

A Dance of Forgiveness

Machal also indicated a dance, the Jewish circle dance, the Horah. The encampment of Israel in a circle around the Tabernacle indicated a "dance" of forgiveness, in which God and Israel participated. Their very failures could move them toward holiness.

It might even be that God wants to forgive even more than we may have the courage to ask for it: "More than the calf wants to suckle, the cow wants to nurse" (B.T. Pesachim 112b).

<https://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/51400/different-variations-of-forgiveness>

So, in the midrash, Israel says to the world, "Can you arrange a dance for us as was provided by our father Jacob when he went out from the house of Laban? ... sixty myriads of angels danced and leapt before Jacob our father when he went out from the house of Laban.

"Or, can you arrange a dance for us like the dance that God will arrange for the righteous in the world to come?... In the future God will be at the center of a dancing circle of the righteous... And they will point at Him in the center - as it is said, 'For this is God our God forever. He will lead us beyond death (*al-mut*)' (Psalm 48:15) Also, 'in' *almut* - in youthful agility, as in the dance of the righteous.'
- Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah 7:2 - commentary on the Song of Solomon.

[The meaning of almut is fuzzy - *mut* is death, but the word *almut* is also used as a musical direction in the psalms and could mean 'to play with agility,' or 'sing with a virgin voice.']

A Leap of Desire

In fact, the rabbis associated the banners (*diglo, degalim*) with a "leaping (*dilug*) of desire." At the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, when Israel saw God's angelic hosts and chariots: "The chariots of God are two myriads, two thousands; God is among them at Sinai in holiness," (**Psalm 68:18**) they were all arrayed under separate banners, as it is said, "Marked out by banners from among myriads" (**Song of Solomon 5:10**), they too began to long for banners, and said, "O too that we could be ranged under banners like them!" Therefore it is said, "He has brought me into his house of wine" - this refers to Sinai upon which was given Torah, which has been compared to wine (**Proverbs 9:5**)

"And His banner over me was love" - They said, "O that He would show great love for me!... God said to them, "How you long to be ranged under standards! As you live, I shall fulfill your desire!" - as we read, "God shall fulfill all your petitions" (**Psalm 20:6**). God immediately informed Israel by telling Moses, "Go arrange them under banners as they have desired."

- From Bamidbar Rabbah 2:2, as reflected in "Bewilderments" by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, P.23-24.