

Insights from the Meshech Chochma

רב מאיר שמחה הכהן מדווינסק זצ"ל

פרשת פינחס תשפ"ד

Shulie Plawes

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה וְאֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן אֹתָם בְּעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב עַל יַרְדֵּן יְרֵחוֹ לֵאמֹר: (פרק בו' ג)
Moshe and Elazar the Kohen spoke with/to (Klal Yisrael) in the plains of Moab, by the Jordan near Jericho, saying:

The syntax of our pasuk, specifically **וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה וְאֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן אֹתָם** jumps off the page. In its most literal sense, it translates as *Moshe and Elazar the Kohen spoke them* and so there must be a tweaking of the phrase. According to Rashi, “they spoke *with* them about this matter i.e., it is as if the pasuk had written **עִמָּם**.” Ibn Ezra understands the verse as meaning *to* i.e., as if the pasuk had written **אֲלֵהֶם**. Either way, there clearly must be an explanation for why the Torah chose such an obstruse wording.

Rav Hirsch offers an innovative approach*: “Not **וַיְדַבֵּר אֹתָם** but **וַיְדַבֵּר אֹתָם**. They called each individual by his name and related to him such-and-such a house and such-and-such a family, as it says in the first census...**לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְבֵית אָבוֹתָם בְּמִסְפַּר שְׁמוֹת.../according to their families, according to their fathers’ household, by number of the names...** The main purpose was not to count them to determine their total number; rather, the main thing was to call each individual by his name and to relate him to his family and to his tribe, so that he should know his national task as **וַיֹּצֵא צֶבֶא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל**. Calling each individual by his name gave him a sense of self-worth and enabled him to recognize the importance of his contribution to his house, his family, and his tribe... (So that) what is spelled out there by the words **...בְּמִסְפַּר שְׁמוֹת...** is summarized here by the phrase **וַיְדַבֵּר אֹתָם**: they pronounced the name of each individual separately. ...For this ‘announcement’ of each one according to his descent attested to the sexual purity of the families... There is no doubt, however, that this ‘calling out’ of the six hundred thousand names was not done by just two people but, rather, Moshe and Elazar were assisted here by the **נְשִׂאִים**, just as we found at the first census.”

Rav Meir Simcha begins his piece on our pasuk by telling us to look at the Rashi and Ibn Ezra mentioned earlier and then elaborates as follows: The counting after leaving *Mitzraim* was a command from Hashem to Moshe and Aaron, who subsequently instructed the **נְשִׂאִים** to count their individual tribes and report back to them with their figures. As the pasuk earlier in **לֵד לְפָרֶק ד'** tells us: **וַיִּפְקֹד מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן וְנָשִׂאֵי הָעֵדָה.../Moshe and Aaron and the leaders of the Assembly counted...** (Although this pasuk is referring to the counting of the Leviim at that time, it likely applies to the first national census as

well.) This changed dramatically with this second census. Because the terrible *מִגֵּפָה*, which had taken twenty-four thousand lives, involved the despicable actions of a *נָשִׂיא שֶׁבֶט*, this counting would exclude all the *נְשָׂאִים* from participating in any active way. Only Moshe and Elazar would be involved. In order not to publicly embarrass them, as Rav Meir Simcha puts it, *(ש)נפסלו כל הנשיאים ממדרגתם*, the Torah conceals it by using the word *אֲתֶם* i.e., Moshe and Elazar spoke directly to the people about this census and not through their leaders. Rav Meir Simcha concludes by telling us that this “potch in panim” was only temporary, for we read in next week’s Parsha, concerning the rules of vows and oaths, *וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל רְאֵשֵׁי הַמִּטּוֹת לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל* / *Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Children of Israel* and as Rashi there points out that the Torah specifies *רְאֵשֵׁי הַמִּטּוֹת* even though these laws were given to all of Klal Yisrael, “because Moshe accorded honor to the *נְשָׂאִים* by teaching them first, and only afterward did he teach all the rest of the Children of Israel.” This, Rav Meir Simcha believes, is the Torah informing us that the *נְשָׂאִים* were placed back onto their lofty perch!

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in his *Sefer, Ozney L'Torah*, agrees with the *Meshech Chochma's* premise that the *נְשָׂאִים* were not involved in this census. Without addressing Rav Meir Simcha directly, he questions why collective punishment was meted out to *all* of them for the sin of just *one*? He answers that earlier in our Parsha, Rashi, quoting *סנהדרין פב*: tells us that “the tribes spoke disparagingly of Pinchas, accusing him of murder and protesting that ‘this grandson of Puti, who used to fatten calves for idolatrous sacrifices i.e., Eleazar, Pinchas’ father, had married a daughter of Yisro, a former Midianite priest, who was called Putiel-one who fattened for a god-and had the gall to slay a prince of Israel!” This widespread response on the part of the Nation seemed to support the honor of the *נְשָׂאִים* above Pinchas. Hashem needed to teach them an extraordinarily strong lesson: where *חילול השם* is being transgressed, there is no room for *כבוד*. One must eradicate it immediately, even if it means killing a *נְשִׂיא*! Not allowing *all* the *נְשָׂאִים* *any* involvement in this census would punctuate that message.

*With permission of the Editors

לזכר נשמת אבי מורי ר' ישראל מנחם בן ר' שלום ז"ל
לזכר נשמת אמי מורתי רחל בת ר' אלחנן אביגדור ע"ה
לזכר נשמת חמי מורי ר' יעקב נתן בן ר' ישראל שלמה ז"ל
ולזכר נשמת הרב יהודה בן ר' אברהם שמחה (קופרמן) זצ"ל
מחבר הגהות על ספר משך חכמה