

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Pinchas

The Story of Korach – In Parshas Pinchas

BACKGROUND: THE VERSES AND SOME QUESTIONS

A lengthy section at the beginning of our parsha is devoted to the census of the Jewish people prior to entering Eretz Yisrael. Although the chapter consists almost entirely of detailing the various family names and numbers, there is a very noticeable exception. The first of the tribes to be counted is Reuven, the oldest. Within the course of listing the main families of the tribe of Reuven, the Torah writes as follows:¹

וּבְנֵי אֱלִיָּאב נְמוּאֵל וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם הוּא דָתָן וְאַבִּירָם קְרִיאֵי הָעֵדָה אֲשֶׁר הִצִּי עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אַהֲרֹן בְּעֵדַת
קָרַח בְּהִצְתָּם עַל ה'. וַתִּפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם וְאֶת קָרַח בְּמֹות הָעֵדָה בְּאֹכַל הָאֵשׁ אֶת
הַמְּשִׁים וּמְאֹתָיִם אִישׁ וַיְהִיו לְגֵם. וּבְנֵי קָרַח לֹא מָתוּ.

And the sons of Eliav were Nemuel, Dasan and Aviram. These are Dasan and Aviram, notables of the assembly, who contended against Moshe and Aharon within the assembly of Korach, when they contended against Hashem. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and Korach with the death of the assembly, when the fire consumed two hundred and fifty men, and they became a sign. And the sons of Korach did not die.

There are a number of basic questions to be raised concerning these verses:

1. Given that we are currently dealing with the count of the Jewish people, this seems to be a *very lengthy* digression explaining why Dasan and Aviram were not part of the count. After all, that episode happened a mere three parshiyos ago and no one is likely to have forgotten about these people in the interim! Compare this with the case of Er and Onan, concerning whom the verse dealing with the families of Yehuda simply says “And Er and Onan died in the Land of Canaan,”² without providing any recap at all of the vents described in chapter 38 of Bereishis!
2. Not only do the verses review in considerable detail the events of Parshas Korach, they actually present details which were *not even mentioned* in the Torah’s account of that episode. Nowhere in Parsha Korach do we here about the fact that his sons did not die. It is quite astonishing, therefore, that in the recap we actually discover *new information!*

1 Bamidbar 26:9-11.

2 Verse 19.

3. The concluding words of verse 10, “and they became a sign,” are somewhat enigmatic. What exactly was this sign, and how is it relevant to our parsha?

READING THE NUMBERS

R' Yaakov Kamenetzky³ explains the matter by prefacing with another question. If we look at the tallies for the various tribes, we will see that they all end in hundreds. The same is true for the earlier count in Parshas Bamidbar, except there we also find a tribe ending with fifty. Are we to understand that every single tribes had numbers down to fifty or a hundred, with not even one ending with, say, seventeen or sixty three?

The explanation of this matter is that the census was conducted for those who go out to war. As such, it took the form of counting people in units as they would function in the army. What is the size of such units? If we survey later section in Tanach, we will see that units comprised fifty men, within companies of a thousand men. For example:

1. When the prophet Shmuel is asked by the people to appoint a king, he responds by telling them the implications of what having a king might mean: “זֶה יְהִיָּה מִשְׁפֹּט הַמֶּלֶךְ... אֶת בְּנֵיכֶם יִקַּח... וְלָטוּם לּוֹ שָׂרֵי אֲלָפִים וְשָׂרֵי חֲמִשִּׁים – *This will be the protocol of the king... he will take your sons... to appoint for himself captains of thousands and captains of fifty.*”⁴
2. Later in Tanach, when King Achaziah sent soldiers to meet with Eliyahu, the verse states: “וַיִּשְׁלַח אֵלָיו שָׂר חֲמִשִּׁים וַחֲמִשִּׁיּוֹ – *He dispatched to him a captain of fifty along with his fifty men.*”⁵

We see that numbers of soldiers were broken up into groups of fifty.⁶ Therefore, says R' Yaakov, it could very well be that the tribes comprised a total that did not end in fifty or a hundred; however, since they were counted as units, the numbers always end with fifty or a hundred, with the surplus individual soldiers being distributed among the existing units.

A SIGN AMONG REUVEN

With the above approach, we have provided an explanation for the tally of all the tribes that are counted in our parsha – except for one. When we look at the total for the tribe of Reuven, it is forty-three thousand, seven hundred *and thirty!* What are we to make of a number ending in thirty? We can no longer say that this was the precise number for we have come to understand that the totals in this census do not go lower than fifty! Why was Reuven different?

Amazingly, the answer to this question is presented by the Torah itself. Having mentioned the names of Dasan and Aviram, the Torah then “digresses” to recap the story of their participation in the Korach’s revolt. The reason this takes place within the count is because it comes to explain

3 Commentary *Emes le’Yaakov*, Parshas Pinchas.

4 Shmuel I 8:11-12.

5 Melachim II 1:9.

6 A notable exception to this rule is actually in next week’s parsha, where the units in the war against Midian comprised a hundred men each (see 31:14). R' Yaakov explains that in contrast to units for military purposes which were made up of fifty men, groups dealing with matters of sanctity comprised a hundred men, such as the groups of Kohanim (see e.g. Melachim II, 11:4). The war against Midian was for the distinct purpose of “exacting Hashem’s vengeance” on them for causing the Jewish people to sin; as such, it was categorized as a “campaign of sanctity.” This is evidenced by the fact that even the tribe of Levi, who generally do not send of their number for war, being that they are devoted to matters of sanctity, nevertheless contributed a thousand men to this war as did all the other tribes. Given the nature of this war, we can understand why the units comprised a hundred men, as befits matters of sanctity.

something about the count, namely the anomalous ending of thirty in the tribal census of Reuven. Whereas all the other tribes were rounded off to numbers of fifty or a hundred, Reuven was not. The reason was in order to make it noticeable that there were *people missing from the tribe of Reuven*, namely, those who had gotten involved with Korach. This is the meaning of the words in verse ten, “and they became a sign,” meaning, that episode resulted in the creation of a sign among their number, in the form of the “deficient” ending with thirty men!

“AND THE SONS OF KORACH DID NOT DIE”

All this, however, leads us to a simple question. After all, Reuven was not the only tribe that featured prominently in Korach’s revolt. There was, of course Korach himself, who was from the tribe of Levi. If participation from the tribe of Reuven led to there remaining a deficient group among their number as a sign, one would certainly expect this to be the case with the tribe of Levi. And yet, when we get to the census of Levi later in our chapter, we find that their number is twenty-three thousand.⁷ That is an extremely round number! Met with such a disparity, we will surely be moved to ask: Why did Reuven – the *participant* – become a sign, while Levi – the *instigator and primary protagonist* – did not?

It is this very question the Torah proceeds to address with the concluding verse of this section: “And the sons of Levi did not die.”

Originally, Korach’s sons sided with their father in his campaign against Moshe. However, as things intensified and reached the critical moment when the ground opened its mouth to swallow all those involved, they did teshuvah and were spared. Korach’s sons thus have the distinction of being, in a sense, the first *baalei teshuvah* among the Jewish people! Therefore, in recognition of their actions and out of respect for their honor, the tribe of Levi was spared having its on sign which would be an ongoing reminder to them of their earlier deeds and their total number remained complete. This, says R’ Yaakov, is the explanation of why we are informed about the sons of Korach, not in Parshas Korach itself, but in our parsha within the context of the Torah counting the tribe of Reuven!

Indeed, it is most fascinating to note how this idea continues to express itself even later in the Torah. In Chumash Devarim, as Moshe enjoins the people to remember the major events over their forty years in the wilderness, he says the following:⁸

וְאִשֶּׁר עָשָׂה לְדָתָן וְלֵאבִירָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיאָב בֶּן רְאוּבֵן אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה הָאָרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַעֵם וְאֶת
בְּתֵיהֶם... בְּקֶרֶב כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל

And [remember] that which He [Hashem] did to Dasan and Aviram the sons of Eliav son of Reuven when the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households... in the midst of all Israel

It is quite amazing. Here, Moshe is describing what we know so well as “the episode of Korach,” and yet he refers only to *Dasan and Aviram*, with no mention whatsoever of Korach himself! Here, too, it was out of respect for Korach’s sons who heroically relinquished their initial stance siding with their father, recognizing the error of that position and distancing themselves from him accordingly.

7 Verse 62.

8 Devarim 11:6. See also Tehillim 106:17 and Rashi’s commentary *ibid*.