

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Bamidbar

R' Simcha Wasserman (d. 1992) once commented that we find a pattern in Rashi's first comments in the beginning of each of the five books of the Torah. Just as the introduction to a book sets a framework for the chapters that follow, the Midrashim that Rashi chooses for his first comments on each of the five books help set a framework for the content that follows. If we examine these five opening comments, we will find they all describe the special relationship between G-d and the Jewish people.

In Rashi's opening comments to Genesis, he quotes a Midrash which addresses why the Torah starts with the creation of the world and not with the mitzvot. The Midrash says the gentiles may claim the Jews do not have any unique right to the land of Israel. The Jews will respond that just as G-d created the world, he also decided to give the Land of Israel to the Jews. Rashi chooses to start his commentary with a midrash that tells of G-d's special bond with the Jews, as evident from His giving them the Land of Israel.

In the very beginning of Exodus, Rashi comments how the Torah counts the sons of Jacob right before they die, even though it already counted them earlier in Genesis. Rashi says G-d counts them to show His affection for them. Similarly, Leviticus starts with the words, "He called to Moshe," and Rashi says "calling" denotes love. Rashi contrasts G-d's call to Moshe with the less affectionate way He communicates with the gentile prophet Balaam, which the Torah describes by saying, "G-d happened upon Balaam."

In the beginning of Numbers, Rashi says G-d counts the entire Jewish people repeatedly because He loves them. The counting in the beginning of this book takes place a month after Moshe erected the Mishkan, unlike the counting described in the beginning of Exodus which occurred in Egypt. The very first verse of Deuteronomy lists places where the Jewish people angered G-d by their sinful behaviour, alluding to the rebuke Moshe will give them for these sins later in the book. Rashi points out that the Torah only hints to these sins, instead of directly mentioning them, in order to give the Jews the proper dignity and respect.

Why does Rashi insist on starting each of the five units of the Torah with a description of the affectionate relationship between G-d and His people? We see from Rashi that our Torah observance ought to be built upon a recognition of the love G-d has for us. Although we know that our mission as Jews carries with it great responsibility, we also must appreciate the privilege of being ambassadors for G-d. If we look at the instructions of the Torah as expressions of G-d's love for us, then keeping the laws of the Torah becomes a privilege, as opposed to a burden.

When the Jewish people said at Sinai, "We will do and we will listen," they said so with an appreciation of G-d's deep care for them. The Talmud (Shabbat 88a) records that a person once challenged Rava, one of the great scholars in Talmudic times, that the Jews' unconditional acceptance of the Torah was illogical



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continued ...

and impetuous. They should have asked G-d what it says in the Torah before accepting it! Rava explained to him that at Sinai, the Jews did not question G-d because they trusted him that he would not give them laws that would be too difficult for them to fulfill. Rashi says they acted like someone who loves another person and therefore trusts them that they will not give them a task they cannot handle.

We talk about G-d's affection for us in the blessing we say before reading the Shema twice daily. The blessing starts by saying G-d loves us because of our ancestors, and then it expresses our wish to continue this relationship by studying His Torah and keeping his mitzvot. Since the Jewish people received the Torah in the morning, the morning blessing talks specifically about G-d choosing the Jewish people and therefore ends with the phrase, "Who chooses His people Israel with love."

The blessing before Shema at night also talks about love, but this time the blessing stresses the eternal nature of G-d's love for his people. Instead of allowing the darkness of the night to demoralize us and weaken our resolve in our service, we recognize that G-d's love accompanies us at all times. We can remain steadfast in our observance of mitzvot, even in the most difficult times, by realizing the Torah is an expression of G-d's love for us.

The Talmud (Megilla 31b) says we specifically read the blessings and curses of Parshat Bechukotai prior to Shavuot, reminding us of our great responsibility to observe G-d's laws. Tosafot points out that we always have one more Shabbat before Shavuot, after the week of Bechukotai, on which we read Parshat Bamidbar. He explains we do not want to read the harsh list of blessings and curses right before Shavuot.

In light of the above, we may add that while the blessings and curses bring us to fear G-d, reading about the counting of the Jewish people in the beginning of Bamidbar inspires us to love G-d. While the rewards and punishments of the Torah remind us of our responsibility to keep the mitzvot, reading about G-d's interest in counting the entire Jewish nation reminds us of His love for us. If we recognize the special privilege of being a Jew, the Shavuot holiday that immediately follows takes on a whole new meaning.

Shabbat Shalom

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