



*Yeshivat Ma'alot*  
*Parashat Bamidbar*  
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ישיבת מעלות  
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### *Divine Flags*

The book of Bamidbar describes the life of Bnei Yisrael in the desert. One of the important things that characterize Bnei Yisrael's wanderings throughout this period is the way in which the shvatim, the tribes, were organized. The Torah states that each shevet had a specific flag that represented them<sup>1</sup>: "Bnei Yisrael shall encamp, each man by his banner according to the insignia of their fathers' household, at a distance surrounding Ohel Moed shall they camp."

Chazal understood that the flags which represented Bnei Yisrael were not only markers by which each shevet could identify themselves, rather they had a deeper and more profound meaning. The Midrash in Shir Hashirim Rabbah relates how all the nations of the world would look in awe and amazement at Bnei Yisrael and would try to deceive them in order that Bnei Yisrael would live alongside them. By living with them the nations would then be able to take control over them. To this, Bnei Yisrael responded that there is no greatness amongst the nations like the greatness of the tribal flags which Hashem gave in the desert.

Yalkut Shimoni<sup>2</sup> relates that at Matan Torah Bnei Yisrael saw the camps of angels in heaven and that they were arranged according to flags. Therefore Bnei Yisrael also desired to have flags, just like those of the heavenly angels.

What is the root of the difference between normal flags and the flags that Bnei Yisrael had- why can't the nations of the world also make flags like the flags that were in the desert? It is therefore apparent that these flags were no ordinary flags; they had a deeper component that the other nations could not grasp. The world looks at flags as a representation of a group of people. It is a symbol around which people identify themselves. For example countries unify themselves around their flag. Military units march to battle as their flag flutters over head. However the flags of Bnei Yisrael are different, they are rooted in an exalted heavenly place. The flags are not representations of ideas and ideals; rather they have a Godly mark upon them. This Godly "stamp" contains the essence of each tribe; from these heavenly insignias the tribes draw their true identities. Each flag has within it its own vibrant spiritual world which comes to life in each tribe.

<sup>1</sup> Bamidbar 2,2

<sup>2</sup> Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim, Remez 681

There is also a different approach to understand the meaning of flags. As mentioned earlier, Bnei Yisrael were encamped based on their flags while they were in the desert. Hashem's revelation to Bnei Yisrael during the years that they were in the desert was direct and upfront. Hashem spoke to Moshe face to face at Har Sinai. Bnei Yisrael ate mann from Heaven and drank water from miraculous springs which Moshe made appear. So too with regard to the tribes; each tribe knew exactly where they belonged both in the physical layout and in the spiritual makeup of Bnei Yisrael. When Bnei Yisrael entered Eretz Yisrael this reality changed. Divine intervention was not expressed through open miracles but rather through the normal everyday life that Bnei Yisrael lived. This way of life also lends itself to complications and struggles. People aspire to gain power, wealth, and control. Countries wage wars on one another, as the battle for survival is fought. Along with this, as individuals and tribes are exposed to these new situations, new strengths are found within them.

The Midrash<sup>3</sup> explains that Ya'akov Avinu compared each shevet to a different animal, and then compared them all to the same animals. From this we can learn that each tribe has its own unique characteristics, yet each one can also reveal values and important points which make up other tribes. This Midrash emphasizes the point that the division of the shvatim is not definite, and it is possible to intertwine between them.

The division of Bnei Yisrael into shvatim is not always positive. Sometimes division leads to arguments and quarrels. Harav Kook explains<sup>4</sup> that there is also a positive side to each shevet forgetting their tribal identity. When this personal identity is forgotten, the deeper identity of Klal Yisrael, the universal soul of Yisrael, is able to be expressed. The Jewish nation is able to merge together as one as the boundaries and walls between individuals and factions are blurred.

There are generations, such as the generation of the desert, in which the greatness of each shevet is expressed through its individuality, its heavenly flag. There are other generations where the greatness of each shevet is expressed by the fact that they are part of Klal Yisrael. And there are also generations where both aspects are expressed. Through these different expressions, the holiness and uniqueness of the Jewish people are conveyed.

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<sup>3</sup> Bamidbar Rabbah 13, 8

<sup>4</sup> Orot, Yisrael V'tchiato 27