

Parsha Q's – Bamidbar

Our focus this week is on Bamidbar 4:17-20, the last section of this week's reading, but direct comments will follow an extended introduction.

The parashah and book of Bamidbar begin with a census of the Children of Israel excluding the tribe of Levi. The rationale for this exclusion is not explicitly stated, and Rashi (1:49) offers two radically different explanations:

a) Levi is "Hashem's Legion", and thus deserves to be counted separately

Two) The census taken here is the background for the decree (following the episode of the spies) in 14:29 condemning this generation to die in the wilderness. The exclusion of Levi from the census leads to the exclusion of Levi from the decree (whether magically/mystically or because it causes them not to have a representative among the spies; the second explanation has obvious advantages, but fails to explain why those tribes whose spies remained virtuous, i.e. Yehudah and Efraim, were punished.).

Note that b) carries the implication that G-d is aware at the outset that this generation will not succeed.

I'm not worried about the philosophic problem of foreknowledge vs. free will here; Torah regularly presents G-d as surprised by human behavior, and the (standard but not unanimous Jewish) position rejecting this as philosophically impossible acknowledges that it is nonetheless literally true (i.e., we say "k'b'yakhol", "as if it were possible" and move on). What is striking here is the claim that Bamidbar should be read as assuming Divine foreknowledge of sin.

In that light, we note that the threat of destruction – and the interconnection between *kedushah* (= sanctity), and destruction – are strong themes in this week's reading.

One) In 1:51-53 we read that an Israelite who performs the Levites work carrying the Tabernacle will die, and that accordingly the Levite should camp around the Tabernacle so that there will not be *ketzeff* (anger – possibly hierarchy-based anger) on the Children of Israel.

Two) In 3:1-4 we read (yet again) about the deaths of Nadav and Avihu while bringing an "alien fire".

Three) In 3:10 we are warned that a non-*kohen* carrying out priestly work will die

Four) In 3:11-13 we read that the Levites are substitutes for the firstborns of the Children of Israel, who were sanctified when Hashem killed all the Egyptian firstborn

Five) In 4:15 we read that the *kohanim* must carefully pack the Tabernacles utensils for storage lest the Children of K'hat touch them while carrying them and die.

Which brings us, finally, to 4:17-20.

Hashem spoke to Mosheh and Aharon:

"Do not utterly excise the *shevet* (tribe or staff: political unit) of the Family K'hat from among the Levites.

Do this for them, and they will live and not die; have Aharon and his sons come and arrange them individually (*ish ish*: note that nonetheless some take the antecedent as the Tabernacle utensils rather than the K'hatites) with regard to their work and their carrying,

(so that) they will not come to see *k'vala et hakodesh* (usually: "while the Sacred Things are stored", but see below) and die."

Question: Why is the Family K'hat referred to as a *shevet*?

Question: Why is this command directed to Mosheh and Aharon?

Question: If the concern is accidental seeing, would that really be likely to happen so often as to utterly wipe out K'hat?

Question: If *k'vala* refers to storage (the etymology is "swallow"), why the shift from *kisui*, which is used in the rest of the parashah?

Several other translation of *k'vala* have been proposed.

One) Netziv suggests that it refers to momentary seeing, with no possibility of aesthetic appreciation, like swallowing without chewing or savoring.

Two) Rabbeinu M'yuchas cites a Midrash which takes this as a warning that anyone stealing the utensils will die – perhaps that midrash would translate "and they will not come to see – because that would be like stealing – the Sacred Things and die".

Three) Ibn Ezra, and possibly Rashbam, seem to translate it as "deconstruction".

Four) A midrash translates it as "even if they catch a glimpse of a section as small as a *bala* falling from the eye" – here *bala* seems to mean "something infinitesimal", but the etymology is unclear to me.

I think a more compelling translation – or at least complementary translation - would have this verse refer to the potential of the sacred to be destructive, to "swallow up", although the precise syntactic

means of accomplishing this are not yet clear to me. In addition to explaining the word-choice, this would also parallel the extremely broad threat with which the section opens.

Note that the midrash suggests that the answer to my second question is yes, as the sacred is often the subject of fatal attraction.

I have not, however, seen any at all satisfying answer to my first question. I suggest as an avenue of exploration whether there is a connection between this and Hashem's foreknowledge of the forthcoming communal failure, i.e. whether Hashem's foreknowledge is not miraculous but rather stems from His understanding of the leadership strengths and weaknesses of Mosheh and Aharon.