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Parshah

MATTOS - MASSEI: AN ARMY OF THOUSANDS

Hashem tells Moshe that the time has come to exact retribution against Midian for the role they played in the Jewish People's sinning, which had resulted in 24,000 Jews dying in a plague.

Moshe then speaks to the People, instructing them to arm themselves and to form a battalion with each tribe providing a thousand men.

ד אֶלֶף, לַמִּטָּה, אֶלֶף, לַמִּטָּה--לְכֹל מִטּוֹת
יִשְׂרָאֵל, תִּשְׁלַח לְצָבָא.

“A thousand from a tribe, a thousand from a tribe, for all the tribes of Israel shall you send to the legion”

The first question that arises is if Moshe has asked for the People to give a thousand men per tribe, why does he seemingly need to emphasize that ALL tribes were to provide a thousand men – is it not obvious that he means all tribes without exception?

The next verse relates Bnei Yisrael's adherence to Moshe's request:

ה וַיִּמְסְרוּ מֵאֵלֶּיךָ אֶלֶף לַמִּטָּה--וְגַם--
עֶשֶׂר אֶלֶף, חֲלוּצֵי צָבָא.

“So there were delivered from the thousands of Israel, a thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for the legion”

Another couple of points to note:

Firstly, what is the implication of the word וַיִּמְסְרוּ – “so there were delivered”? Did they not want to go?

Secondly, we are aware that there were 12 tribes and the arithmetic of 12 tribes multiplied by 1,000 men is relatively simple so why do we need to be told that the army totalled 12,000 soldiers?

Rashi, commenting on verse 4, says that the reason that we are told that all tribes were asked to provide a thousand men is inform us that the tribe of Levi was included. However, when the next verse tells us that a total of 12,000 were sent to war, does that mean that the tribes of Ephraim and Menashe were treated for this purpose as only one tribe? If so, would we not have expected Rashi to tell us that fact too?

In reference to Bnei Yisrael's apparent hesitation to go to war in verse 5, Rashi tells us that it is to their credit since the reason why they had to be coerced was as follows: they knew that this war was to be Moshe's final act and so they reasoned that if they delayed going into battle, they would be prolonging his life. Their display of love for Moshe at this point - even though at other times the relationship between the People and Moshe had been so bad that Moshe feared for his life - is recorded by the Torah to praise Bnei Yisrael.

Fascinatingly however, the Imrei Emes reminds us that the above thought process cannot be attributed to the tribe of Levi, since in Moshe's bracha to Levi in parshas Vezos Habracha he says:

הָאִמֵּר לְאָבִיו וּלְאִמּוֹ, לֹא רָאִיתִי, וְאֵת-אָחִיו
לֹא הִכִּיר, וְאֵת-בְּנָיו לֹא יָדַע: כִּי שָׁמְרוּ אִמְרָתֶךָ,
וּבְרִיתֶךָ יִגְדְּרוּ

This taught us that tribe of Levi had performed all its duties to Hashem in a selfless manner, without regard for family ties; they followed His instructions to a tee. So even though they knew that Moshe's demise would swiftly follow the military campaign, they would nevertheless have carried out Hashem's will without postponement.

This clarity, says the Imrei Emes, also helps us to reconcile our questions above. Indeed, when Moshe asked for all the tribes to provide a thousand men, including Levi, the total yielded was 13,000. When called to action, the other tribes apart from Levi hesitated, therefore the Torah refers in verse 5 to the number of 12,000 men who had to be delivered against their will.

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2. Pinchas led out the army together with three things: (see Rashi, 31:6) the Aron, the Tzitz and a trumpet with which to blow the terua sound. Why the need for all these things?