

## Ezra HaSofer's Ingenious Institution: Beginning Sefer Bamidbar on the Shabbas Prior to Shavuos

Next Shabbas, the Shabbas immediately preceding the festival of Shavuos, we will read parshas Bamidbar. The Shulchan Aruch states (O.C. 428, 4): “ולעולם קורין פרשת במדבר סיני קודם עצרת”—**parshas Bamidbar is always read before Atzeres** (the sages' name for Shavuos). The source for this institution comes from the Tosafos addressing the Gemara (Megillah 31b). There we learn that Ezra HaSofer instituted the reading of the “tochachos” in parshas Bechukosai prior to Shavuos and the “tochachos” in parshas Ki Savo prior to Rosh HaShanah.

The Gemara provides the reason for this institution: **“כדי שתכלה—השנה וקללותיה—so that the year should end along with its curses.** On Shavuos, the “peiros ha'ilan”—the fruit or offspring of the tree—are judged based on the performance of the past year; similarly, on Rosh HaShanah, all of creation is judged based on the events of the preceding year. If so, Tosafos ask why parshas Bamidbar is inserted prior to Shavuos—creating a separation between Shavuos and parshas Bechukosai. They provide the following answer: **“ומטעם זה אנו קורין במדבר סיני קודם עצרת, כדי שלא—להסמיך הקללות שבבחוקותי לעצרת”—parshas Bamidbar constitutes an iron curtain, a barrier separating between the curses of the “tochachah” and the festival of Shavuos.**

### Sefer Bamidbar Separates between Those Who Left Mitzrayim and Those Who Entered the Land

Having given the matter considerable thought, I would like to propose an explanation for Ezra HaSofer's ingenious institution. As we know, based on the Gemara (Megillah 15a; Nedarim 22b; Sanhedrin 44a; and others), Torah she'b'chsav is divided into five books: Bereishis, Shemos, Vayikra, Bamidbar and Devarim.

Elucidating the passuk in Bereishis (2, 4), the Gemara (Menachos 29b) states: **“אלה תולדות השמים והארץ בהבראם” - בה' בראם—the heavens and the earth were created with the letter “hei.”** According to the Zohar hakadosh in the Raiyah Mehemnah (Pinchas 216b), this refers to the five books of the Torah with which HKB”H created the universe. [The letter “hei” possesses a

numerical value of five.] This notion is also reflected in Rashi's comment (Bereishis 1, 31): **“יום השישי. הוסיף ה' בשישי בגמר מעשה בראשית, לומר שהתנה עמהם על מנת שיקבלו עליהם ישראל חמשה חומשי תורה—at the conclusion of creation on the sixth day, we find the addition of the letter “hei” in the word “השישי”, indicating that the continued existence of creation would depend on Yisrael's acceptance of the five books of the Torah.**

It is worth noting what our blessed sages' reveal in the Midrash (B.R. 3, 5). The five books of the Torah with which HKB”H created the universe correspond to the five times the word **“אור”—meaning light—is mentioned in the passage depicting the first day of creation.**

Thus, we can appreciate that whenever we engage in any form of Torah study, we are introducing into the world the five aspects of **“אור”** which HKB”H created on the first day of creation. In this manner, we merit walking this earth with the illumination of Torah, as it is written (Vayikra 26, 3): **“אם בחוקותי תלכו”—if you will walk in accordance with my decrees.** In a similar vein, another passuk states (Tehillim 119, 1): **“אשרי תמימי דרך ההולכים—Praiseworthy are those whose way is wholesome, who walk with the Torah of Hashem.** For, without the light of Torah guiding our way, we are like a blind man, feeling his way through the darkness, unable to reach his desired destination.

Now, let us examine what our blessed sages teach us in the Midrash (Bereishis 3, 5) concerning the association between the five pesukim mentioning the word **“אור”** and the five books of the Torah:

**“אמר רבי סימון, ה' פעמים כתיב כאן אורה כנגד חמשה חומשי תורה, ויאמר אלקים יהי אור - כנגד ספר בראשית שבו נתעסק הקב"ה וברא את עולמו. ויהי אור - כנגד ספר ואלה שמות שבו יצאו ישראל מאפילה לאורה. וירא אלקים את האור כי טוב - כנגד ספר ויקרא שהוא מלא הלכות רבות. ויבדל אלקים בין האור ובין החושך - כנגד ספר במדבר שהוא מבדיל בין יוצאי מצרים לבאי הארץ. ויקרא אלקים לאור יום - כנגד ספר משנה תורה שהוא מלא הלכות רבות.”**

“G-d said, ‘Let there be light;” corresponds to sefer Bereishis, in which HKB”H created His universe; “and there was light,” corresponds to sefer Shemos, which describes Yisrael’s departure from darkness and entrance into the light; “G-d saw that the light was good,” corresponds to sefer Vayikra, due to the numerous halachos it contains; “and G-d separated between the light and the darkness,” corresponds to sefer Bamidbar, which separates between the generation that left Mitzrayim and the generation that entered the land; “G-d called the light ‘day;” corresponds to Sefer Devarim, which is also replete with halachos.

### The Generation that Departed Mitzrayim Are Labeled “Light” whereas the Generation that Entered the Land Are Labeled “Darkness”

Analyzing the text of the Midrash: “and G-d separated between the light and the darkness,” corresponds to sefer Bamidbar, which separates between the generation that left Mitzrayim and the generation that entered the land”—we find that the generation of the exodus from Mitzrayim is compared to “light,” whereas the generation that entered the land is compared to “darkness.” Furthermore, sefer Bamidbar separates between the “light” and the “darkness.” This is indeed fascinating! How is it possible to characterize the generation of the exodus as “light” and the generation that entered the promised-land—possessing ten types of kedushah—as “darkness”?

We shall begin by introducing the wonderful commentary of the Pri Tzaddik (Bereishis 2; Bamidbar 2). The generation of the exodus from Mitzrayim is remarkable in that it was privileged to hear Hashem’s voice directly at Matan Torah. Subsequently, they learned Torah from the mouth of Moshe—who learned directly from the Almighty with unparalleled clarity. Hence, their entire existence was a form of Torah she’b’chsav—Torah from heaven.

In contrast, the generation that entered the land, learned Torah from Yehoshua—who learned from Moshe. In the words of the Mishnah (Avos 1, 1): “משה קיבל תורה ומסרה ליהושע”—**Moshe received Torah from Sinai and gave it over to Yehoshua.** That form of Torah, according to the Zohar hakadosh (Part 2, 276a), represents Torah she’b’al peh—Torah that is passed on from generation to generation; for, Yehoshua was not able to speak with HKB”H directly, as Moshe did. Additionally, the Gemara (Temurah 9a) teaches us that during the mourning period for Moshe, under the leadership of Yehoshua, three hundred halachos were forgotten. Ultimately, those halachos were restored by Osniel ben Kenaz by means of the art of “pilpul”—which falls into the category of Torah she’b’al peh.

Hence, we see that the leadership under Yehoshua resembled “darkness”; because matters were not as crystal-clear as they were during the times of Moshe. Nevertheless, by means of laborious study in areas of Torah she’b’al peh, the light is ultimately revealed—providing thorough clarification of the particular subject. Regarding this process, we learn in the Midrash Tanchuma (Noach 3):

“שלא כרת הקב”ה ברית עם ישראל אלא על התורה שבעל פה, שנאמר (שמות לד-כז) כי על פי של הדברים האלה כרתי אתך ברית... וזו היא תורה שבעל פה שהיא קשה ללמוד ויש בה צער גדול, שהוא משולה לחושך שנאמר (ישעיה ט-א) העם ההולכים בחושך ראו אור גדול, אלו בעלי התלמוד שראו אור גדול, שהקב”ה מאיר עיניהם באיסור והיתר בטמא ובטהור, ולעתיד לבא (שופטים ה-לא) ואהביו כצאת השמש בגבורתו.”

HKB”H established a covenant with Yisrael over Torah she’b’al peh. Torah she’b’al peh is difficult to learn and is associated with much anguish. It is compared to “darkness.” The passuk states (Yeshayah 9, 1): **“The people walking in the darkness saw a magnificent light.”** This refers to the Talmudic scholars who revealed a magnificent light with HKB”H’s guidance. In the Future to Come (Shoftim 5, 31): **“and let those who love Him be like the powerfully rising sun.”**

### Moshe’s Countenance Resembled the Sun while Yehoshua’s Countenance Resembled the Moon

In this manner, Rabbi Tzaddok interprets what we have learned in the Gemara (B.B. 75a): **“פני משה כפני חמה ופני יהושע כפני לבנה—Moshe’s face resembled the sun, while Yehoshua’s face resembled the moon.** For, Moshe exemplifies Torah she’b’chsav, the source of illumination—like the light of the sun. On the other hand, Yehoshua exemplifies Torah she’b’al peh, receiving its illumination from Torah she’b’chsav—like the light of the moon. The moon lacks illumination of its own; it receives its illumination from the light of the sun.

Rabbi Tzaddok proceeds to bring additional proof that Torah she’b’al peh is associated with “darkness.” We find elsewhere in the Midrash Tanchuma (Ki Tisa 36) an elucidation of the passuk (Shemos 34, 28): **“ויהי שם עם ה’ ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה, מגין היה יודע: משה אימתו יום, אלא כשהקב”ה היה מלמדו תורה בכתב היה יודע שהוא יום, וכשהיה מלמדו על פה משנה ותלמוד היה יודע שהוא לילה”—Moshe was there with Hashem forty days and forty nights. How did Moshe know when it was daytime? When HKB”H would teach him Torah she’b’chsav, he knew it was daytime. When He would teach him the Oral Law—Mishnah and Talmud—he knew it was nighttime.** So, we see that HKB”H learned Torah she’b’al peh with Moshe during the night—during the reign of the “darkness.”

Further substantiation is provided by the Gemara (Sanhedrin 24a) regarding the passuk in Eichah (3, 6): “במחשכים הושיבנו” —**“He has placed me in darkness like the eternally dead.”** Rabbi Yirmiyah said: **This refers to the Babylonian Talmud.** We learn that engaging in the study of Torah she’b’al peh is like walking in the dark of night to reveal its light.

This, then, is the interpretation of the Midrash: **“and G-d separated between the light and the darkness; corresponds to sefer Bamidbar, which separates between the generation that left Mitzrayim and the generation that entered the land.”** The generation of the exodus from Mitzrayim learned Torah directly from Moshe; thus, they represent the “light” of Torah she’b’chsav—every detail was specified by Heaven. In contrast, the generation that entered the land learned Torah from Yehoshua. Thus, they represent “darkness”—requiring the illumination provided by exertion in the study of Torah she’b’al peh.

### The Netziv’s Interpretation of the Midrash

Now, let us examine the interpretation of the Midrash found in the great Netziv of Volozhin’s, ztz”l, HaEmek Davar (introduction to sefer Bamidbar). He teaches us that the generation that exited Mitzrayim under the leadership of Moshe Rabeinu were privileged to live a miraculous existence—beyond the laws and confines of nature. They experienced the incredible miracles associated with the exodus from Mitzrayim and were sustained by the “mahn”—the bread that fell from heaven—during their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. This type of supernatural existence constitutes a form of “light.”

The existence of the generation that entered the land under the leadership of Yehoshua bin Nun, however, changed to an existence based on the laws of nature. When they entered Eretz Yisrael the “mahn” ceased to fall from heaven; instead they were sustained solely by the produce of the land. The capture of the land was accomplished by means of battles conducted within the laws of nature—this type of warfare actually began in sefer Bamidbar with Yisrael’s wars with the Canaani and Sichon. This type of existence is analogous to “darkness,” since it is conducted under the cloak of nature. Here is an excerpt of what the Netziv writes:

“דעיקר זה הספר הוא המחליף ומשנה הליכות עם ה' בחיי העולם, מאז שהגיעו לארץ ישראל מן הדרך שהלכו במדבר, שבמדבר היו מתנהגים במדת תפארת שהלך לימין משה, שהוא לגמרי למעלה מהליכות הטבע, ובארץ ישראל הלכו בדרך הטבע בסתרי השגחת מלכות שמים ברוך הוא.”

וזה השינוי התחיל עודם במדבר בשנת הארבעים כמו שביארנו בפרשת חוקת, על פי זה השינוי נעשו מלחמות ישראל עם הכנעני ועם סיחון בדרך הטבע, וגם המטה

לא היה עוד ביד משה תמיד, אלא לעת הצורך לפי ההכרח כמו שביארנו שם, ועל זה השינוי המצויין בזה הספר אמרו חכמינו ז”ל בבראשית רבה פרשה ג', ויבדל אלקים בין האור ובין החשך, זה ספר במדבר שהוא מבדיל בין יוצאי מצרים ובין באי הארץ.”

This sefer mainly deals with the transformation in the way the daily lives of Hashem’s people were conducted, from the time they reached Eretz Yisrael. In the wilderness, they lived a supernatural existence; in Eretz Yisrael, they lived by the laws of nature, with Hashem’s guidance and control concealed.

This transition actually began while they were still in the wilderness, in the fortieth year. The staff was no longer a constant feature in Moshe’s hand; it was only used as necessary. Concerning this transformation, Chazal stated in Bereishis Rabbah (3): **“and G-d separated between the light and the darkness” corresponds to sefer Bamidbar—which separates between those who left Mitzrayim and those who entered the land.**

Thus, we find two interpretations regarding the Midrash’s depiction of sefer Bamidbar as: **“it separates between those who left Mitzrayim and those who entered the land.”** According to Rabbi Tzaddok, it is referring to the differences in the way they received and learned Torah. The generation of the exodus represented Torah she’b’chsav, whereas the generation entering the land represented Torah she’b’al peh. According to the Netziv, the generation of the exodus was privileged to live a supernatural existence whereas the generation that entered the land lived by the laws of nature.

### Torah She’b’chsav and Torah She’b’al Peh— Supernatural versus Natural

I was inspired to propose a connection between these two incredible ideas, based on a revelation from the Maharal of Prague in Be’er HaGolah (1). HKB”H gave us two types of Torah—Torah she’b’chsav and Torah she’b’al peh—because they correspond to the two distinct ways in which HKB”H conducts His universe—the supernatural and the natural. When obvious miracles are prevalent, HKB”H is conducting the universe beyond the realm of nature. When the universe is being conducted within the realm of nature, it is still being guided and controlled magnificently by Hashem; however, His management and supervision are cloaked within the laws of nature, exemplified by the solar system.

As we know, HKB”H created the world by means of the Torah. As the Midrash explains (B.R. 1, 1): “התורה אומרת אני הייתי כלי” —אומנתו של הקב”ה... היה הקב”ה מכיט בתורה ובורא את העולם, והתורה אמרה (בראשית א-א) בראשית ברא אלקים, ואין ראשית אלא תורה” —In other words,



Searching for a source for this amazing idea, I found it stated explicitly in the Semichat Chachamim. Here is what he writes: **כ"ו ה' אותיות אחרונות שבשם הם תורה שבעל פה, וחצי השם י"ה הוא סוד תורה שבכתב.** He does not explain, however, why the first half of the holy name—"yud-kei"—represents Torah she'b'chsav. Yet, based on what we have learned, it is quite clear. Since these two letters represent the words **י'שמחו ה'שמים**, they are associated with Torah she'b'chsav, which was used to create the heavens and is referred to as "shamayim."

Now, let us embellish this notion that the name "yud-kei" alludes to Torah she'b'chsav. Torah she'b'chsav is composed of the Ten Commandments, which Yisrael heard at Har Sinai—designated by the letter "yud" with a numerical value of ten—and the five books of the Torah—designated by the letter "hei" with a numerical value of five. Together they form the letters "yud-kei" representing the concept of **י'שמחו ה'שמים** — alluding to the Written Law. On the other hand, the two letters "vav-kei" allude to Torah she'b'al peh composed of the six orders of the Mishnah — designated by the letter "vav" with a numerical value of six — and the fact that their entire purpose is to explain and clarify the obscure points found throughout the five books of the Torah — designated by the letter "hei" with a numerical value of five. Thus, the combination of the two letters "vav-kei" represents the concept of **ו'תגל הארץ** — an allusion to the Oral Law.

So, now, let us address the formula recited before the performance of a mitzvah: **ל"יחד שם י"ה ב"ו"ה ביהודא שלים בשם כל ישראל—**for the sake of uniting the two halves of the holy name—the letters "yud-kei" and "vav-kei"—**in complete unity on behalf of all Yisrael.** Every mitzvah that we perform is composed of two elements. First, there is the basic performance of the mitzvah spelled out in the Written Torah. Second, there is the detailed explanation of the mitzvah spelled out in the Oral Torah. There is not one single mitzvah mentioned in the Written Torah that is not addressed in detail in the Oral Torah.

It is for this very reason, that prior to performing any specific mitzvah, we express our intention to fulfill said mitzvah in the most ideal manner possible—combining the command as it appears in Torah she'b'chsav with its unique details as outlined in Torah she'b'al peh. This intention is conveyed by the formula: **ל"יחד שם י"ה** — with the purpose of uniting the name "yud-kei"

— representing **י'שמחו ה'שמים**, Torah she'b'chsav--**ב"ו"ה**—with the letters "vav-kei"—representing **ו'תגל הארץ**, Torah she'b'al peh; **ב"יהודא שלים בשם כל ישראל** — **in complete unity in the name of all Yisrael**—who received these two magnificent components of the Torah at Har Sinai.

## Five Books Corresponding to the Four Letters of Havaya and the Tip of the "Yud"

Taking the high road, let us now attempt to explain why HKB"H chose specifically sefer Bamidbar, the fourth of the "chamishah chumshei Torah," to separate between the generation of the exodus from Mitzrayim and the generation that entered the land. The Arizal teaches us in Ta'amei HaMitzvot (Ha'azinu), concerning the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah, that while performing the mitzvah one must have in mind that the five books of the Torah correspond to the name Havaya. Sefer Bereishis corresponds to the tip of the "yud"; sefer Shemos corresponds to the "yud" itself; sefer Vayikra corresponds to the first "hei"; sefer Bamidbar corresponds to the letter "vav"; sefer Devarim corresponds to the final "hei."

According to this scheme, the two sefarim—Shemos and Vayikra--that deal with the generation of the exodus—who as we have learned represent Torah she'b'chsav—correspond to the two letters "yud-kei." We know that these two letters are an abbreviation for **י'שמחו ה'שמים**—alluding to Torah she'b'chsav which was given from the "shamayim" above. On the other hand, sefer Bamidbar and sefer Devarim—which deal with the generation that entered the land, representing Torah she'b'al peh—correspond to the letters "vav-kei." These two letters are an abbreviation for **ו'תגל הארץ**—alluding to Torah she'b'al peh, which is revealed by the Torah scholars down on earth.

This explains why HKB"H chose for the separation between these two generations to begin specifically with sefer Bamidbar and to conclude with sefer Devarim. For, these two sefarim correspond to the final two letters of the name Havaya—the "vav" and the "hei"—which embody the notion of **ו'תגל הארץ**. These two letters represent Torah she'b'al peh, which was given primarily to the generation entering the land under the leadership of Yehoshua. He was the first person to receive Torah she'b'al peh—directly from the mouth of Moshe Rabeinu.

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