



Sicha Summary

Chelek 18 | Bamidbar | Sichah 2

The Verse:

After drafting the levites into Divine service, the Torah says: “Count the children of Levi according to their fathers’ house according to their families. Count all males from the age of one month and upward.” (*Bamidbar* 3:15)

The Rashi:

From the age of one month and upward — When he is no longer in the category of {possible} premature birth {i.e., when he is viable}, he is counted among those called, “keepers of the holy charge.” Rabbi Yehudah, son of Rabbi Shalom said: This tribe is accustomed to being counted from the womb, as it says, “whom she bore to Levi in Egypt”; as she entered the gate of Egypt, she bore her {Yocheved}, yet she {Yocheved} was counted as one of the seventy souls. For if you count their total, you find only sixty-nine, but she completed the number. (*Midrash Tanchuma*, “*Bamidbar*,” ch. 16)

The Questions:

- 1) Rashi does not generally explain the reasons for the *mitzvos* in his commentary. Yet here he justifies the significance of the one-month mark as being the point at which the child becomes viable. Why does he do so here?
- 2) What issue does Rashi address by continuing, “he is counted among those called, ‘keepers of the holy charge’”? How does this help us understand the reason for counting a one-month old? And why does Rashi use this particular title, “keepers of the holy charge”?

3) Why does Rashi quote the lengthy explanation of Rabbi Yehudah?
What critical questions does that passage answer?

The Explanation:

The command to count the levites immediately follows Hashem's command to draft them into Divine service in the place of the firstborn. (*Bamidbar* 3:12) The counting, it would seem, is connected to the service performed by the levites. Yet a levite was only qualified to serve at age thirty (*Bamidbar* 4:3), and our verse counts one-month-olds!

To address this, Rashi says that even a month-old infant (who has passed the age of non-viability) can be included among the “keepers of the holy charge,” and he is therefore included in the census. The obvious question is, how can we call a one-month old a “keeper of the holy charge” if he does not begin service until he is thirty?

To address this, Rashi introduces the teaching of Rabbi Yehudah: “This tribe is accustomed to being counted from the womb... as she entered the gate of Egypt, she bore her {Yocheved}, yet she {Yocheved} was counted as one of the seventy souls.”

Yocheved, as an infant, was the one to bring Yaakov's family to completion — to the full number of seventy. It is, therefore, unsurprising that every levite has this same ability, to contribute to the Jewish nation as a whole, even as a newborn.

Further Probing:

But a keen student will still not be satisfied. If a child is not doing actual Divine service, what is the point of calling him a “keeper of the holy charge”?

In order to address this, Rashi cites the name of the Sage, Rabbi Yehudah, son of Rabbi Shalom, because he maintains that a title conferred by the Torah is substantive and significant — even if the title is not entirely consistent with the facts on the ground.

Rabbi Yehudah's opinion is found in his response to a difficulty raised regarding the length of King David's reign: One verse says that he ruled for forty years (I *Melachim* 2:11), but another verse implies that he ruled for forty years and *six months* (II *Shmuel* 5:5).

Rabbi Yehudah explains that King Davod behaved improperly during those six months by killing the Edomites. Scripture reprimands him by not counting this six-month period as part of his reign, even though he was king at the time.

And More Probing:

In the end, it is still unclear how we can call a one-month-old who does not engage in Divine service, a "keeper of the holy charge".

This is clarified by Rashi's nuanced wording, "keeper," referring to the service of guarding the perimeter of the *Mishkan*. By the mere fact that he resides in the levite camp, a newborn technically "guards" the *Mishkan*, even if he does not do so actively.

A Final Question:

A keen student will press further: Being counted as one of the levites recognizes a person's unique contribution to Divine service. But a newborn baby does not have an independent existence, nor is he capable of contributing to the work.

By saying that the levites are "accustomed to being counted from the womb," Rashi clarifies that a levite is unique in that even as he emerges "from the womb," when he is entirely dependant on its mother, he is still "counted," i.e., recognized as a unique, independent being.

The verse describing Yocheved's birth is the proof-text for this. In order to forestall the supposition that Yocheved was counted only because she was a fully independent infant, Rashi makes sure to say she was born as her mother "entered the gate of Egypt." Meaning, she was not yet born, and

therefore, she was not yet independent before entering Egypt. Rather, she was born at the gate, yet she was still considered to be part of the family that “entered Egypt.”

The Wine from Rashi’s Commentary:

Yocheved represents *malchus* — the Divine channel which “completes” and perfects the ten *sefiros* by introducing their *light* into the lower dimensions of existence. But because *malchus* descends into this constricting, worldly reality, it needs spiritual nourishment from the higher *sefiros*. Yocheved was thus born at the “gate of Egypt”; her purpose was to enter Egypt and illuminate it with Divine influence. But her mother became pregnant with her beforehand, outside the confines of Egypt, so she would be able to have the spiritual capacity to carry out her mission.