

Derashot LeDorot
A Commentary for the Ages
Numbers



Norman Lamm

DERASHOT
LEDOROT
NUMBERS

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Stuart W. Halpern

FOREWORD BY

Maurice Lamm

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Dedicated to the Memory of

Sara Lamm Dratch

שרה רבקה בת הרב נחום ומינדל לאם

Beloved daughter, mother, wife, sister, and aunt

*May her memory be forever a source
of blessing, song and, most of all, laughter.*

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Foreword

Maurice Lamm

How is it possible for one brother to write about another brother? There are just too many memories, too many personal thoughts, and too many subjective opinions – not to speak of the superstition that two brothers sharing the same platform may invoke an *ayin hara* (evil eye); hence the practice of brothers not receiving consecutive *aliyot*. I am not disturbed by any of these concerns. First, as you shall see, I am objectively subjective in my comments about my brother. Second, years ago, my brother, Norman, and I spoke on the same dais at an annual convention of the Orthodox Union. I presented my remarks first, he followed. He introduced his comments by taking note of the practice of two brothers not sharing sequential honors. He pointed out that this restriction does not apply to *hagba* and *gelila*, the lifting and wrapping of the Torah scroll following its communal reading; brothers may share these honors. “And so,” he said as he followed me on the program, “my brother has raised the issues, I will wrap things up.”

This story is informative in many ways. One, it gives me license to appear, without apprehension, in the foreword of his book. And two, it gives me the opportunity, through sharing this story, to reveal just a

bit of his quick wit, linguistic flare, and love of puns, all endearing to those of us who know him.

As youngsters we were practically opposites: I was an independent spirit, athletic, and self-assured...he was not. He was serious, studious, and obedient, traits that were to stand him in good stead as he matured into an accomplished scholar, leading *talmid hakham*, prominent leader, inspiring teacher and orator, accomplished writer, and profound thinker. In our early years we shared the typical amount of sibling rivalry. At one point our father became so irritated with us that he cried out, "Cain and Abel, that's what I have for two sons!" Each of us was certain that he himself was Abel, and that the other was Cain.

As we became adults, despite each of us living on opposite coasts, we grew extraordinarily close. We innately understood the future words of Maya Angelou, "I don't believe an accident of birth makes people sisters or brothers. It makes them siblings, gives them mutuality of parentage. Sisterhood and brotherhood is a condition people have to work at." And work at it we did. Our life's trajectories were similar – we both were influenced by learning, religious commitment, and *weltanschauung* by the Rav, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, and by our grandfather Rabbi Yehoshua Baumol; we both entered the rabbinate; we both wrote and published; we even look very much alike. We supported each other, encouraged each other, helped each other, and, most importantly, loved one another. I am genuinely proud of my big brother and his achievements as a brother to me, Tzibby, and Miriam; a husband to Mindy; a father to Chaye and David, Josh and Rivkie, Shalom and Tina; and Sara, *a"h*, and Mark; a grandfather and great grandfather (too many to list, *ken yirbu*), rabbi, teacher, author, and leader whose work has irrefutably shaped the nature of contemporary Judaism, modern Orthodoxy, Torah study, and the worlds of Jewish and general higher education.

Rather than Cain and Abel, we are Moses and Aaron, genuinely joyful in each other's accomplishments. When God informed Moses that Aaron will meet him in the desert and go with him on his mission to Pharaoh, "Aaron will see you and rejoice in his heart" (Exodus 4:14). Rabbi Shimon Ben Yoḥai taught (Song of Songs Rabba 1): "The Almighty said that the same heart that rejoiced at the status of his brother will have precious stones placed upon it, as it is written, 'Aaron

will thus carry the names of Israel's sons on the decision breastplate over his heart” (Exodus 28:29).

Moses similarly rejoiced when he anointed Aaron in his stead as the high priest. We, like Moses and Aaron, are *aḥim le-de'a*, brothers in purpose and destiny, sharing fraternal fate and filial fortune.

Writing this foreword also gives me the opportunity to fulfill a *mitzva*. The Talmud (*Ketubot* 103a) notes that the *vav* in the verse *ve'et imekha* commanding us to honor our parents (Exodus 20: 12) is there “*lerabot aḥikha hagadol*,” to direct us to honor our older brother as well (as my own never hesitates to remind me). The obligation is derived from the presence in the verse of a *vav haḥibur*, the conjunctive *vav* (connoting “and”). The presence of this *vav haḥibur* explains why for me this is a *mitzva kala*, a commandment easily fulfilled. Literally, the phrase “*vav haḥibur*” means “the hook that connects” and it is that precious hook of fraternal connection, expressed in brotherhood and friendship, that is one of the most treasured and cherished facets of my life.

I am so very privileged to honor my *vav haḥibur* who is also my *ḥaver* (friend) on the occasion of the publishing of his *ḥiburim*, the written essays of his insightful and inspiring sermons, in this magnificent *maḥberet* (collection). You, like I, will be hooked!

Rabbi Maurice Lamm is an internationally renowned author, president of the National Institute for Jewish Hospice, and professor at Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. He was the rabbi of Beth Jacob Congregation in Beverly Hills from 1972 until his retirement in 1985. Rabbi Lamm is the author of many books including The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning and The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage.

Editor's Preface

Stuart W. Halpern

It is an honor to present to the reader this selection of Rabbi Norman Lamm's sermons on the book of Numbers, from among the numerous *derashot* given by Rabbi Lamm between the years 1952 and 1976 in both Congregation Kodimoh in Springfield, Massachusetts, and the Jewish Center in New York, New York.

The book of Numbers recounts the travels and travails of the Israelites in the wilderness, and contains numerous tales of rebellions, crises, and tests of leadership. As such, in his addresses to his congregants about the book, Rabbi Lamm provided his audience with insights into the nature of power, the ingredients of nationhood, the proper balance of humility and confidence and, above all, the importance of eternal fealty to, and belief in, Moses and the Torah.

These sermons are presented as they were first articulated, with only minor editorial tweaks. The "current events" referenced in many of the *derashot* are an integral part of the power and relevance of the pieces, and thus those parts that describe them in detail have been retained so that the reader can best appreciate the historical and communal situation that Rabbi Lamm was responding to at the time. On occasion, the

reader will note certain sensitivities of language that have developed since these words first were spoken.

Much gratitude is owed to the many individuals who assisted in the production of this volume. As these sermons were gleaned from the selection on the Lamm Heritage website at Yeshiva University, many thanks go to the Dean of Libraries of Yeshiva University, Mrs. Pearl Berger, whose idea it was to create such a wonderful online collection of *derashot*. Many thanks to Ms. Hilda Tejada for her work in preparing this volume for publication, as well as to Kayla Avraham and Jonathan Schwab for their assistance. Rabbi Maurice Lamm's truly personal and eloquent foreword is tremendously appreciated. And as always, this volume would not be possible without the enthusiastic encouragement from my wife, Ahuva Warburg Halpern, and the entire Lamm, Dratch, Halpern, and Warburg families.

The publication of this book was made possible by the OU Press as well as the support of the Michael Scharf Publication Trust of RIETS/Yeshiva University Press, which, for many decades, has played a vital role in the production of Torah scholarship under the auspices of Yeshiva University. Lastly, my sincerest appreciation goes to Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Tomi Mager and the entire Maggid team for their hard work on producing the beautiful volume you hold in your hand.

From the moment they were first spoken, the words in this volume cried out "*kitvuni le'dorot*," "write me for generations" (*Megilla 7a*). Indeed, may they echo for generations to come.

Bemidbar

*Banner in the Desert*¹

In our *sidra* of this morning, the first of the fourth book of Moses, we read of the peregrinations of Israel in the desert. The people were to be divided according to their tribes and march through the wilderness in a set pattern and order. Each tribe, in addition, was to have its own banner, or flag. This banner, or *degel*, was to differentiate it from all the other tribes of Israel.

What is the origin of this interesting commandment? Our sacred tradition gives us an amazing answer. That is, that God did not command the Israelites concerning the banners on His own initiative. Rather, He merely acceded to the request of the Jews who insisted upon banners in the desert. “The Israelites desired that they have banners just like the ministering angels” (Numbers Rabba 2:3).

What a remarkable statement! Are we to imagine that the Israelites conceived of the angels as tin soldiers – and envied them? Do angels really parade as if they were in an elementary school play?

1. May 20, 1961.

In order to understand the profound symbol of the banners in the desert and their relation to angels, we must understand that there are two words for a banner or flag in Hebrew and each has a different connotation. Those words are *degel* and *nes*. *Nes* is an external symbol, a sign to others; it is meant for outsiders. Thus, Isaiah (11:12) speaks of the Messiah's function towards the rest of the world at the end of days: "He shall raise a *nes* for the nations from the distance." The *nes* is meant for other nations; it is for the distant, for the outsider. *Degel*, on the other hand, is a symbol of the fulfillment of one's own purpose, his own destiny, the meaning of his own life.

Nes implies a communication with others; you identify yourself thereby to others. *Degel* implies communion with yourself; you identify yourself to yourself – it is a symbol of self-identity.

Nes will cause people to rally. *Degel* will rally people to a cause. *Nes* is appropriate to the *harim*, the mountains, with which it is often associated in the Bible. For when you are on top of the mountain you reach down to others. The *degel* is generally associated with *midbar*, the desert. When you are in a wasteland, there you must first find yourself and discover who you are and what you stand for.

In Jewish tradition, an angel is created for one single purpose, for one solitary *sheliḥut*. The angel, the *malakh*, knows what it is he was created for, and he proceeds to do it. Therefore, the *degel* is indeed symbolic of the angel. The *degel* symbolizes a single-minded purpose – and an angel lives for just that. Hence, "The Israelites desired that they have banners just like the ministering angels," means that the Israelites wanted, like the angels, to know the great purpose for which each of them was brought into the world. Every Jew wanted to know what he stood for, what function he was to serve in the grand drama of Creation.

Purpose does not mean only a career, a profession, a matter of occupational ambitions. One does not have a noble purpose in life by selling real estate, or securities or textiles, or diamonds. These are only the means to an end. And the end, the goal, the purpose – that is the *degel*.

Like the ministering angel, each of us must consider life as a mission, a *sheliḥut*. Each of us must consider himself an ambassador of God who must report back to the Almighty at the end of his earthly

pilgrimage, who will then judge us as to whether or not we have carried out our task faithfully.

Of course, it is difficult for everyone to know what single great purpose he is to serve in life. Some people, perhaps the greatest number, are helplessly lost, with no idea of what they are doing in the world. They are like driftwood on the wild waves of a stormy ocean. These are people who lack identity, who seemingly have no pulse, no *degel*. It is about such people that the Russian theologian Nikolai Berdyaev said that they have not only lost the way, but they have also lost the address. They do not know where they are going, and in fact they do not know if one is supposed to go any place at all in life. They live in a vast *midbar* without the benefit of *degalim*.

Many areas of modern life are such bannerless deserts. Television is one such notable example. It was most refreshing to hear Mr. Newton Minnow, who was recently appointed as the Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, lecture the broadcasters about their responsibilities. It was a speech which will long be remembered by thoughtful people. He reproached them for having no purpose other than that of exploiting the airwaves for financial gain. The words he used to describe the present situation are most appropriate: "a vast wasteland." In Hebrew, that is a *midbar*! What Mr. Minnow was trying to do – vainly, I fear – was to give them *degalim*, banners, a sense of purpose, a set of high goals, in this wasteland. It will be a real pity if the vested interests of industry and politics manage to destroy his plan and return the control of the TV airwaves to those who regard it as nothing more than another source of income.

Most of us, however, and most decent people, are not in that category of those who are completely lost. We know in general where we belong, what our general goals are, what camp we belong to. However, we do not know our individual purposes in life. We know that as human beings it is our duty to reflect the divine image in which we were created, by being decent, compassionate, and kind. We know that as Jews, more specifically, we are obligated to the prophetic challenge: "*atem edai, ne'um Hashem*," "You are My witnesses, says the Lord" (Isaiah 43:10). Our task as Jews is to be witnesses to the presence of God in human history. And, as the sainted hasidic author of the *Sefat Emet* put

it, how are we witnesses? By living according to “the words of the Lord,” that is, Torah. But if you ask such a person: What specifically is your task, your purpose in life, your specific function in the divine economy of creation? He does not answer because he does not know.

Some individuals, a minority, are truly blessed. They have matured spiritually, and have discovered what it is exactly for which they were created; they know their purpose in life. How fortunate they are!

These last two types – those who know the general trend of their being and those who know the specific purpose for which they were brought into the world – are represented in our *sidra* by the words, “Every man according to his camp, and every man according to his banner” (1:52). These represent the two types we have mentioned (see *Sefat Emet* ad loc.).

“Every man according to his camp” represents those who know the general camp with which they are identified. They have identified themselves with a group. “Every man according to his banner” are those who know specifically their *degel*, their purpose in life. They have identified themselves also within the group itself. “Every man according to his camp” may be in the right location, but that individual tends to fritter away his energies and resources on the wrong task, on trivialities. Such a person is in the right *maḥaneh*, the right group, and the right environment, but has never managed to find his or her own self.

The story is told of the sainted Ḥafetz Ḥaim who, in a time of great and grave community crisis, noticed one of the wealthiest men in the town staying long after the hour of services in order to recite the Psalms. The gentle and pious Ḥafetz Ḥaim approached him with the following rebuke. The Ḥafetz Ḥaim told him that he had no right to spend his time reciting the Psalms when God had blessed him with the wherewithal to alleviate the grave crisis which had struck the community. “Your business,” the Ḥafetz Ḥaim said, “is to organize campaigns for charity and disburse it yourself, not to spend all your time reciting the *Tehillim*.” And he told him the following parable: “In the army of Czar Nicholas there are many divisions. If a soldier who has been trained for the cavalry and is serving there at present were to decide one fine day that he is going to join the artillery, he may be serving the same Czar and fighting for the same cause, and meaning

well all along. But what probably will happen is that his superiors will court-martial him and put him against the wall to face the firing squad. His purpose was determined by the Czar to be cavalry, not artillery. You cannot define your purpose by yourself." "Every man according to his camp" is not sufficient. We must each strive for "every man according to his banner."

This latter class, those who know what their place and purpose is in life, they have indeed achieved the angelic distinction of *degel*. In the Song of Songs (2:4) we read: "*Diglo alai ahava*," "His banner above me is love." The word *ahava*, love, is numerically equal to *ehad* – "one" (see *Sefat Emet*). The only way to discover the *degel* of *ehad*, the single-minded application to a great cause, your single greatest purpose in life, that for which you were created, is to experiment with every noble purpose, every sacred task, every lofty cause, until you discover that which you can do best and that with which you can fall in love. You must have a deep loyalty and a profound affection for what you recognize as your purpose in life. The banner of *ehad* must participate in *ahava*.

Is there any need to enumerate the hundreds of great purposes which beckon to each and every one of us? There is Israel, education – both your own scholarship and assisting others – there is rescue work, there is fighting cancer and heart disease, there is *Hevra Kadisha* (assisting in burial of the dead), there is Shabbat, there is the Free Loan Society, there is the ability to make others happy through word or song – there is indeed no lack of *degalim*!

About eight hundred years ago, Rabbi Judah, the author of *Sefer Hasedim*, told us that the truly pious man will never neglect any one of the 613 *mitzvot*. Indeed, to have a great cause means never to renege or to be negligent in any of the obligations to which all Jews are committed. However, the truly pious man will choose one of these and, so to speak, "specialize" in it. He will choose one *mitzva* above all others which will become his symbol, his purpose, his *degel*. Perhaps that is why we refer to a young man who has attained maturity as a *bar mitzva* – by right, we should call him a *bar mitzvot* (plural), since on this thirteenth birthday he becomes responsible for the observance of all the commandments. But on this day we tell him that with his assumption of responsibility for all the commandments, he is at the same time urged to find one area

of virtue, or goodness, of religious creativity which will define his own purpose in creation.

It is significant that we read the portion of *degalim* on the Saturday before Shavuot. On Shavuot we each realize that our *maḥaneh*, our camp, is one of Torah. But the *sidra* of *degalim* reminds us that it is not enough merely to be a person of Torah. We must also each know our individual purpose – we are each challenged to find and execute our *sheliḥut*. The *sidra* addresses each of us: What do you stand for? Where and what is your banner in the desert of life?

Happy is the person who can answer clearly and lucidly. Blessed is that individual's life – for his mission, his *sheliḥut*, is triumphant. That person's existence is meaningful and worthy. In the words of King David in Psalms: “We shall sing out over Your victory and raise our banners (*nidgol*) in the name of our God. May God fulfill all your requests” (20:6).