

# DISCERNING NAHSHON'S CHARACTER FROM TEXTUAL AND INTERTEXTUAL NUANCE

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## INTRODUCTION

Nahshon ben Amminadab, at first glance, appears to be a relatively minor character in the Torah. He is mentioned once in Exodus (6:23) as being Aaron's brother-in-law. He is then mentioned several times in the book of Numbers, always together with the other *nesi'im* (tribal chieftains). He is not given any dialogue and his life, at first glance, seems in no way distinguished from any of the other *nesi'im*. Nevertheless, in the midrashic literature he is given far more prominence than any of the other *nesi'im*. His popularity there seems to vastly outsize what we know about him from the Torah itself. However, through a close analysis of the text and context of Numbers chapter 7, we will see the subtle ways in which the Torah can present us with information about a seemingly minor character. We will then look at one particular midrash about Nahshon and see how this analysis forms the basis for it.

## EXEGETICAL CHALLENGES OF NUMBERS CHAPTER 7

In Numbers, chapter 7, the Torah presents the story of the sacrifices of the *nesi'im* on the day of the inauguration of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). This story seems out of place, both chronologically and thematically. Exodus 40:17 states that the *Mishkan* was set up on the first day of the first month (of the second year in the desert). Whether one adopts the view of Rashi (on Num. 7:1) that this story took place on that very day, or the view of Ramban (on Num. 7:1) that it took place on the eighth day of the first month, it is clear that it is occurring prior to the census from chapter 1 of Numbers that took place, *On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt* (Num. 1:1).<sup>1</sup> It is thematically out of place as well. The Torah recorded the various sacrifices that were brought at the inauguration of the *Mishkan* at the end of Exodus and the beginning of Leviticus. It seems entirely out of place that the Torah should suddenly be returning to that topic here.

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The text gives a small hint as to why this story is being brought here. *The nesi'im of Israel, the heads of ancestral houses, namely, the nesi'im of the tribes, those who were in charge of the counting, drew near* (Num. 7:2). The Torah clearly wants us to know that these *nesi'im* are the same as the ones involved in the census. It is hinting that the reason this story is brought here has something to do with the *nesi'im*. It is not immediately clear, though, what exactly this story contributes to our understanding.

#### THE ORDER OF THE OFFERINGS

Another exegetical challenge in chapter 7 comes from examining the order in which the *nesi'im* bring their offerings. Appreciating the significance of this requires examining the order in which the tribes are presented in the first two chapters of Numbers. The Torah lists the tribes three times within the first two chapters of the book of Numbers (twice including the names of the *nesi'im* and once without). The first is when God instructs Moses regarding who is going to assist him in conducting the census of each tribe (Num. 1:5-15). The second is when the Torah is reporting the results of the census (Num. 1:20-42). The third is when the tribes are setting up their camp around the *Mishkan* (Num. 2:3-30). The order of the tribes in each list is as follows:

#### List #1: God's instructions to Moses (Num. 1:5-15)

1. Reuben
2. Simeon
3. Judah
4. Issachar
5. Zebulun
6. Ephraim
7. Manasseh
8. Benjamin
9. Dan
10. Asher
11. Gad
12. Naftali

List #2: Reporting the results of the census (Num. 1:20-42) (Note: changes from the previous list are in bold)

1. Reuben
2. Simeon
3. **Gad**
4. Judah
5. Issachar
6. Zebulun
7. Ephraim
8. Manasseh
9. Benjamin
10. Dan
11. Asher
12. Naftali

List #3: Setting up the camp around the *Mishkan* (Num. 2:3-30) (Note: changes from the previous list are in bold)

1. **Judah**
2. **Issachar**
3. **Zebulun**
4. Reuben
5. Simeon
6. Gad
7. Ephraim
8. Manasseh
9. Benjamin
10. Dan
11. Asher
12. Naftali

The ordering of the first list is relatively straightforward. With a few exceptions, the tribes are basically listed in age order, by birthmother. Ephraim precedes Manasseh, as Jacob had designated him as the leader among Joseph's children (Gen. 48:19). Additionally, the children of the maidservants—Bilhah and Zilpah – are, for reasons that are not entirely clear and not particularly

relevant here, listed together and out of birth order. As can be seen in the lists above, in the second list, Gad moves up from the 11<sup>th</sup> slot to the 3<sup>rd</sup> slot. In the third list, the group of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun collectively moves up from the 4, 5, and 6 positions to the 1, 2, and 3 positions. An examination of the way the camp is set up around the *Mishkan* in chapter 2 will explain these shifts. The tribes are camped in groups of 3 in each of the 4 cardinal directions around the *Mishkan*. Each group has a leader and two other tribes with it. The leaders are Reuben, Judah, Ephraim, and Dan. The choice of each of these makes sense. Reuben is the oldest. Ephraim, as stated above, was the designated leader of the children of Joseph. Dan is the oldest of the children of the maid-servants, and Judah had been designated by Jacob for leadership (Gen. 49:10). If we look at the names under each of these four on the original list, we see that Judah and Ephraim already neatly have a group of three. Ephraim is with Manasseh and Benjamin, and Judah is with Issachar and Zebulun. Grouped like this, however, Reuben's group would have only two members, and Dan's group would have four. This explains why Gad moves up to the number 3 spot in the second list. The census is reported based on the groups that they are going to camp in, and since Gad is going to be in Reuben's group in order to keep the groups even at three apiece, his census numbers are reported there. The third list can be explained similarly. The camp around the *Mishkan* is circular, so, in theory, the Torah could have started the list on any side. It makes sense, however, to begin with the eastern side. They are preparing to move eastward towards Canaan, so the eastern side is the one that will be moving first.<sup>2</sup> The Torah, at this point, though, does not provide us with any explicit explanation for why Judah's group gets to go on the eastern side and lead the people into Canaan.

Strikingly, the order that the *nesi'im* bring their sacrifices in chapter 7 is identical with the order of their camping around the *Mishkan* in list #3 above. There does not seem to be any obvious logical explanation for why this order would have been in place a month prior to the setting up of the camp, when the *nesi'im* were offering their sacrifices to inaugurate the *Mishkan*. Various commentaries try to explain this connection.<sup>3</sup> However, a careful reading of chapter 7 will reveal that it functions to explain why Judah's group was chosen to go on the eastern side and lead the people into Canaan.

## AN INTERTEXTUAL READ OF NUMBERS CHAPTER 7

Understanding the significance of the order in which the *nesi'im* offer their sacrifices requires looking at information we know from elsewhere in the Torah about the day the *Mishkan*'s setup was completed. There are certain events that are indelibly etched into our memories of certain dates, such that we can talk to one another about that date, and the context is assumed without having to state it explicitly. To share some modern day examples, if I tell you about something that took place in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, you could reasonably assume the story I am telling you somehow relates to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Similarly, if I tell you about something that took place in New York City on September 11, 2001, you could reasonably assume that the story somehow relates to Al Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Center. In Jewish history, the day on which the *Mishkan* was completed was such a day as well. Recall the events of that day from the book of Leviticus. After Aaron places various sacrifices on the altar, we read:

*Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being. Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces. Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord.*  
(Lev. 9:22-10:2)

It was supposed to be a day of happiness and celebration of Divine acceptance. Instead the day was forever marred by the death of Nadab and Abihu. They desired to bring an offering in the newly inaugurated *Mishkan*, made some mistake in the procedure, and were struck down by a miraculous fire in the presence of the entire people. The memory of that event was no doubt indelibly etched into the collective memory of the Jewish people. It is always lurking in the background of any discussion of the day the *Mishkan* was completed, without even having to mention it. One may even suggest that the fact

that the story of the offerings of the *nesi'im* is preceded by the Priestly Blessing (Num. 6:22-27) is intended to prime the reader to think about the last time Aaron blessed the people (Lev. 9:22) and what happened immediately thereafter.<sup>4</sup>

Set in this context, the offerings of the *nesi'im* take on new meaning. The last people to bring an offering in the *Mishkan* do not get it exactly right and are struck down by God. God instructs Moses to have one *nasi* bring their offering on each day (Num. 7:11) but does not instruct him in what order they should bring them. One can imagine the *nesi'im* standing around terrified, each saying, "I'm not going first." None of them wants to risk making a slight mistake and winding up like Nadab and Abihu.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Nahshon ben Amminadab, the *nasi* of Judah, takes the plunge, so to speak, and volunteers to go first.

#### ANSWERING THE EXEGETICAL QUESTIONS

With this insight, we can answer all of our exegetical questions about Numbers chapter 7. As stated above, it seems both chronologically and thematically out of place, though the Torah does hint that its presence here is to provide some kind of information about the *nesi'im*. We can now understand that Numbers 7 is a flashback to explain why Judah was chosen to lead the people towards Canaan back in chapter 2. It was because their leader, Nahshon ben Amminadab, had the courage and trust in God to offer the first sacrifice when everyone else was afraid. Should the tribe of Reuben complain that Judah's group gets to go on the eastern side of the *Mishkan*, Moses need only remind them of the events of one month earlier.

#### NAHSHON IN THE MEKHILTA

This understanding of the character of Nahshon is clearly echoed in the *Mekhilta* as well in the opinion of Rabbi Yehudah. "Rabbi Yehudah says: ...When the tribes were standing at the sea, one would say, 'I'm not going in first,' and another would say, 'I'm not going in first.' ...As they were standing around taking advice from one another, Nahshon ben Amminadab jumped into the sea...God said, 'The one who first proclaimed my kingship at the sea, I shall make him king over Israel.'"<sup>7</sup>

The exegetical need for the first part of the midrash is clear in the text from the juxtaposition of what Moses says to the Children of Israel and what God says to Moses.

*But Moses said to the people, 'Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the Lord will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The Lord will battle for you; and you shall remain silent!' Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground.'* (Ex. 14:13-15)

The text juxtaposes Moses telling the people to be silent and witness God's salvation with God telling Moses that this is not a time to be crying out. God also tells Moses to instruct the people to travel into the sea before He instructs him to lift up his rod and split it. Both of these indicate that God wanted someone (or everyone) to take the plunge into the sea before He would work the miracle and split it. Going in under these circumstances would have required setting aside a great deal of fear on the basis of immense trust in God. One could certainly imagine the situation where Moses gives this instruction to the Children of Israel and each person responds with, "I'm not going in first." However, nothing in the text there suggests the identity of the person who goes in first as Nahshon ben Amminadab of the tribe of Judah. While there could have been an oral tradition that this is who it was, the fact that the *Mekhilta* records other opinions regarding the identity of this person mitigates that possibility.

If there is nothing in the text about the splitting of the sea itself that indicates the identity of the person who had the courage to go in first, then Rabbi Yehudah must have seen something elsewhere in the depiction of the character of Nahshon ben Amminadab that indicated to him that Nahshon was the sort of person who would trust God and jump into the sea. Based on our analysis, it is clear that Rabbi Yehudah identified Nahshon ben Amminadab as this character on the basis of a close textual read of the nuances of how Nahshon is presented in Numbers in light of the background we know about the *Mishkan's* inauguration from Leviticus. He sees two almost identical situations where someone needs to do something based on trust in God when everyone else is afraid and

plugs the character involved in one into the other. In typical midrashic fashion, he does not describe to us the process of his analysis. Rather, he concocts a story that depends on the results of the analysis, and leaves it to the reader to figure out where it comes from.

It is significant, as well, that Rabbi Yehudah does not end his midrash by telling us that Nahshon was the first to jump into the sea. Rabbi Yehudah goes on to tell us that God rewards Nahshon for this behavior by giving the kingship to Judah, his tribe.<sup>7</sup> The tribe of Judah seems to have been chosen very early on for leadership. When Jacob blesses his sons at the end of his life, he tells Judah, *The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet* (Gen. 49:10). There is no shortage of reasons from the book of Genesis why Jacob would have been sufficiently impressed with Judah's behavior to designate him for this role. Most prominent is his taking responsibility for Benjamin, when Jacob was afraid something would happen to him in Egypt (Gen. 43: 8-9). If Jacob was aware of his conduct with Tamar and his ability to take responsibility for his own errors (Gen. 38), that could serve as a strong basis for leadership as well. Additionally, we know Jacob was displeased with his firstborn, Reuben, for his conduct with Bilhah (Gen. 35:22), and with his next two sons, Simeon and Levi, for their conduct with Shechem (Gen. 34:30). As the fourth son, Judah naturally would be next in line to claim the mantle of leadership. With so many good options to choose from in the book of Genesis, it is striking that Rabbi Yehudah gives us an entirely different story to explain why the tribe of Judah is chosen for leadership. However, based on our analysis, the meaning of this statement is also clear. The connection between Nahshon and the leadership of the tribe of Judah is based on his analysis of the placement of chapter 7 within the context of the book of Numbers. He recognizes that chapter 7 is where it is precisely to explain why the tribe of Judah is designated to lead the people into Canaan. Again, in typical midrashic fashion, he does not make the point directly, but takes the same character trait displayed by Nahshon at the *Mishkan* and transposes it into a story about the Red Sea, leaving it to the reader to make the connection.

In connecting Nahshon's behavior with kingship, and not merely leading the people into Canaan, which would be the simple meaning of the analysis from Numbers, Rabbi Yehudah also challenges the reader to search for this character trait in other leaders from the tribe of Judah as well. Indeed, this trait seems to

be a perennial trait of the tribe of Judah, and not merely of Nahshon ben Aminadab. In Numbers 13, when the scouts share their fear of entering Canaan, it is Caleb ben Jephunneh of Judah who trusts in God and has the courage to speak up against the other scouts (Num. 13:30).<sup>8</sup> We see this trait again with King David. When Saul's entire army is terror stricken because of Goliath (I Sam. 17:11), David steps up and shows confidence that with God's help, he can defeat him (I Sam. 17:34-37). Ultimately, Jacob may have had any number of his own reasons for wanting to select Judah as the leader in the book of Genesis. However, Rabbi Yehudah's midrash about Nahshon at the sea, based on the close analysis of Nahshon's character in the book of Numbers, uncovers an alternative reason the Torah is giving us for Judah's selection and points us to an important trait of leadership present in leaders from the tribe of Judah throughout Jewish history.

#### CONCLUSION

We have seen the way in which the Biblical text gives insight into an otherwise minor and silent character through subtle nuance in what might otherwise seem like boring annals and lists. It seems odd, at first, that Nahshon brings the first offering at the inauguration of the *Mishkan*. However, once we realize that this is happening immediately after the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, we see that Nahshon is actually displaying tremendous courage and trust in God by bringing the first offering. This subsequently explains why his group is chosen to camp on the eastern side of the *Mishkan*, leading the people into Canaan, thereby explaining why this story is brought where it is. We have seen the way one particular midrash picks up on this nuance and expresses it through the story of Nahshon at the Red Sea, using the insight gleaned from Numbers to solve an exegetical problem in Exodus. Finally, by connecting Nahshon's character to the leadership of the tribe of Judah throughout Jewish history, and not merely in the desert, it challenges us to look for this same character trait in other leaders from the tribe of Judah. In doing so, it is able to give us new insights into the reasons for their election beyond the obvious ones we might have identified in the book of Genesis.

#### NOTES

1. Biblical translations throughout this article are from NJPS with minor changes to better reflect the Hebrew.
2. The analysis in this paragraph of the orders of the lists of tribes is based on M. Leibtag, "Four 'Bchorim': The Order of the Shvatim," <http://tanach.org/bamidbar/bamid/bamids1.htm>
3. See, for example, Rashi on Numbers 7:11.
4. One might also suggest that the presence of incense in the *nesi'im*'s offering is intended to evoke the incense brought by Nadab and Abihu. However, since they brought all manner of other sacrifices and offerings as well, this is hard to prove.
5. This idea can also answer the classical question about why each of the *nesi'im* brings the identical offering. Terrified of winding up like Nadab and Abihu if they got anything wrong, once they saw someone had a formula that worked, they stuck with it.
6. *Mekhilta de-Rebbe Yishmael - Beshalah Mesekhta de-Vayehi Parshah 5* s.v. *Va-yavo'u benei*. All translations from non-Biblical sources in this article are my own. See *Mekhilta de-Rebbe Shimon bar Yohai 14:22* s.v. *Va-yavo'u* for an alternative version of this midrash.
7. In some manuscripts of the *Mekhilta* the referent of this last line is Moses and not Nahshon (on the basis of the passage that was omitted with the ellipsis here). See the notes in the Horowitz-Rabin edition. However, the version quoted in TB *Sota 37a* clearly understood the referent to be Nahshon, as it states explicitly, "Therefore, Judah merited to be the ruler of Israel." Additionally, the *Mekhilta* follows Rabbi Yehuda's interpretation of the events at the Red Sea by telling us that Rabbi Tarfon already had the same idea. It then presents Rabbi Tarfon's midrash, where it is explicitly part of a discussion of why Judah was chosen for leadership, where he raises and rejects various possibilities from the book of Genesis, and ultimately settles on Nahshon at the Red Sea as the reason. I thus take it as reasonable to assume that Rabbi Yehudah's referent was also Nahshon. Even if this assertion turns out to be wrong, everything said here about Rabbi Yehudah can instead be said about Rabbi Tarfon. Though Rabbi Tarfon is earlier, I chose to associate the midrash with Rabbi Yehudah in the body of the text, because that is how it is generally quoted in later sources, e.g. TB *Sota 37a*.
8. Even Joshua does not speak up at first and only joins Caleb later in Numbers 14:6-9.