

Bamidbar

Numbers 1:1-4:20

2021

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Bamidbar is the 34th parashah in the annual cycle of Torah reading and the first one in Numbers, the fourth book of the Torah. It begins with God's instruction to Moses and Aaron to take a census, then begins to enumerate the results. It also gives details on what are the priestly duties.

Numbers 1:1-19

(1) On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, saying: (2) Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. (3) You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms. (4) Associated with you shall be a man from each tribe, each one the head of his ancestral house. (5) These are the names of the men who shall assist you: From Reuben, Elizur son of Shedeur. (6) From Simeon, Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai. (7) From Judah, Nahshon son of Amminadab. (8) From Issachar, Nethanel son of Zuar. (9) From Zebulun, Eliab son of Helon. (10) From the sons of Joseph: from Ephraim, Elishama son of Ammihud; from Manasseh, Gamaliel son of Pedahzur. (11) From Benjamin, Abidan son of Gideoni. (12) From Dan, Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai. (13) From Asher, Pagiel son of Ocran. (14) From Gad, Eliasaph son of Deuel. (15) From Naphtali, Ahira son of Enan. (16) Those are the elected of the assembly, the chieftains of their ancestral tribes: they are the heads of the contingents of Israel. (17) So Moses and Aaron took those men, who were designated by name, (18) and on the first day of the second month they convoked the whole community, who were registered by the clans of their ancestral houses—the names of those aged twenty years and over being listed head by head. (19) As the LORD had commanded Moses, so he recorded them in the wilderness of Sinai.

Bemidbar Rabbah 1:7

(7) "And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Wilderness" (Numbers 1:1). Why the Sinai Wilderness? From here the sages taught that the Torah was given through three things: fire, water, and wilderness. How do we know it was given through fire? From Exodus 19:18: "And Mount Sinai was all in smoke as God had come down upon it in fire." How do we know it was given through water? As it says in Judges 5:4, "The heavens dripped and the clouds dripped water [at Sinai]." How do we know it was given through wilderness? [As it says above,] "And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Wilderness." And why was the Torah given through these three things? Just as [fire, water, and wilderness] are free to all the inhabitants of the world, so too are the words of Torah free to them, as it says in Isaiah 55:1, "Oh, all who are thirsty, come for water... even if you have no money." Another explanation: "And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Wilderness" — **Anyone who does not make themselves ownerless like the wilderness cannot acquire the wisdom and the Torah. Therefore it says, "the Sinai Wilderness."**

Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 19:2:7

"And they encamped in the desert": The Torah was given openly, in a public place. For if it were given in Eretz Yisrael, they could say to the nations of the world: You have no portion in it. But it was given openly, in a public place, and all who want to take it may come and take it.(...)

Just as the recognition of G-d by Abraham, who was the progenitor of Jewish history happened outside the boundaries of the Land of Israel, so too the giving of the Torah occurred outside the Land of Israel. There is no doubt that in this fact is embodied a matter of great significance to teach us that the matter of the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven and of the yoke of Torah and its commandments are not a territorial thing. This is another aspect of the fact of the Torah having been given in the desert.

– Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Sheva Shanim Shel Sichot Al Parashat Hashavua*, Keter, Jerusalem, 5760 – 2000 -pgs 291-292

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Shemot Rabbah 29:9

Said Rabbi Abahu....in the name of Rabbi Yochanan...When the Holy Blessed One gave the Torah, no bird chirped, no fowl fluttered, no ox lowed, the angels did not fly, the Seraphim did not utter the Kedusha, the sea did not roar, the creatures did not speak; the universe was silent and mute. And the voice came forth “Anochi Adonai Elohecha” (I am the Infinite, your God).

Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, p 156-7.

Here [great plains of Dakota] the eye learns to appreciate slight variations, the possibilities inherent in emptiness. It sees that the emptiness is full of small things... A person is forced inward by the spareness of what is outward and visible in all this land and sky... Maybe seeing the Plains is like seeing an icon: what seems stern and almost empty is merely open, a door into some simple and holy state.

The word “bamidbar” is often translated as desert. This translation does not capture the landscape of the biblical region in its entirety... Anyone who has travelled in the south of Israel knows that the region is better captured by the word “wilderness.” It is mountainous and cavernous, often struck by flash floods and hardly monochromatic in color. Images of nature created by our prophets confirm both the danger and the unsettling sensations of being in the wilderness...

There is something about the expansiveness and simplicity of the environment that makes people contemplative and aware of their insignificance. The enormity of the terrain highlights our smallness and often, in place of fear, religious awe arises. Wisdom, too, like a spring or sudden flood, rises where least expected. But it is not only this spiritual rawness which is possible in the vastness of the wilderness that leads to knowledge. It is the desire to put order in the chaos, which leads to the acquisition of Torah. Because humanity feels dominated by the landscape do we try to overcome this impotence by building structures of human intelligence.

(Erica Brown, “Into the Wild,” *Jewish Advocate* May 2001)

One of the main themes of the Tanakh is: leave what you have; free yourself from all fetters; be! ... the first Hebrew hero, Abraham, give[s] up his country and his clan ... the second hero, Moses is charged by God to liberate his people... the desert is the key symbol in this liberation. The desert is not a home. There are no cities. There are no riches. It is the place of nomads who have that which they need, and all that they need is life's essentials, not belongings. . . Life in the desert is preparation for a life of freedom.

Some of the main symbols of the Jewish festivals have their origin in the connection with the desert. The unleavened bread is the bread of those who are in a hurry to leave... the sukkah (tabernacle) is a home of the wanderer... easily built and easily taken

down. As defined in the Talmud it is “the transitory abode.” To be lived in, instead of the “fixed abode” one owns.

The Hebrews yearn for the fleshpots of Egypt, for the fixed home, for the poor yet guaranteed food, for the visible idols. They fear the uncertainty of the propertyless desert life.” (Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* pp. 41-42)

Midrash Tanchuma, Beshalach 1:2

God led them not by the way of the Philistines (ibid. 13:17). He guided them in the manner indicated in the verse *You lead Your people like a flock* (Ps. 77:21), and as in the verse *By day also God led them by a cloud* (ibid. 78:14). ... God led the people about by the way of the wilderness (Exod. 12:18). The Holy One of Blessing said: If I lead them into the land by the most direct route, they will each take possession of a field and a vineyard and neglect Torah. Therefore I will lead them through the wilderness for forty years and cause them to eat the manna and drink the water of the well so that Torah may penetrate into their very beings.

Rabbi D. Shoham, in *Itturei Torah*

Another reason that the Torah portion of Bamidbar is always read right before Shavuot, the time of the giving of Torah: to teach you that if you want to merit receiving Torah, you must make yourself like the wilderness, to have a great measure of humility and to feel no reason for pride, to know that you are bare and lacking all, like the wilderness. (quoted in *Itturei Torah* [Hebrew], vol. 5, by Aharon Yaakov Greenberg [Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1996]).

Rashi on Numbers 1:1

The Lord spoke... in the Sinai Desert... on the first of the month :

Because they were dear to Him, He counted them often. When they left Egypt, He counted them (Exod. 12:37); when [many] fell because [of the sin] of the golden calf, He counted them to know the number of the survivors (Exod. 32:28); when He came to cause His Divine Presence to rest among them, He counted them. On the first of Nissan, the Mishkan was erected, and on the first of Iyar, He counted them.

Akeidat Yitzhak, Numbers, #72

R. Isaac Arama (1420-1494) asks why all the seemingly dull details of the census are necessary. Did God not know the number of Israelites encamped in the desert in any case? Taking account of them one by one, R. Arama argues, serves to teach that each one has individual worth, and is not just a member of the collective. "They were all equal in stature," Arama writes, "and yet the stature of each one was different".

Abraham Joshua Heschel, White House Conference on Aging 1961

May I suggest that man's potential for change and growth is much greater than we are willing to admit and that old age be regarded, not as the age of stagnation but as the age of opportunities for inner growth? The years of old age may enable us to attain the high values we fail to sense, the insights we have missed, the wisdom we have ignored. They are indeed formative years, rich in the possibilities to unlearn the follies of a lifetime, to see through the inbred deceptions, to deepen understanding and compassion, to widen the horizons of honesty, to refine a sense of fairness.

Jacob Milgrom, JPS Torah Commentary (1991), Numbers 31:48-52 and Excursus 2

The basis for the taboo against a census is not known, although one plausible suggestion has been offered: As the shepherd counts his sheep, so the counter of persons must be their owner, a title belonging solely to God and not to man.

From Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Leading a Nation of Individuals"

at <http://rabbisacks.org/leading-a-nation-of-individuals-bamidbar-5779/>

There is a wonderful blessing mentioned in the Talmud to be said on seeing 600,000 Israelites together in one place. It is: "Blessed are You, Lord ... who discerns secrets." The Talmud explains that every person is different. We each have different attributes. We all think our own thoughts. Only God can enter the minds of each of us and know what we are thinking, and this is what the blessing refers to. In other words, even in a massive crowd where, to human eyes, faces blur into a mass, God still relates to us as individuals, not as members of a crowd.

That is the meaning of the phrase, "lift the head," used in the context of a census. God tells Moses that there is a danger, when counting a nation, that each individual will feel insignificant. "What am I? What difference can I make? I am only one of millions, a mere wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the sea-shore, dust on the surface of infinity." Against that, God tells Moses to lift people's heads by showing that they each count; they matter as individuals. Indeed in Jewish law a *davar she-be-minyan*, something that is counted, sold individually rather than by weight, is never nullified even in a mixture of a thousand or a million others. In Judaism taking a census must always be done in such a way as to signal that we are valued as individuals. We each have unique gifts. There is a contribution only I can bring. To lift someone's head means to show them favour, to recognise them. It is a gesture of love.

There is, however, all the difference in the world between individuality and individualism. Individuality means that I am a unique and valued member of a team. Individualism means that I am not a team player at all. I am interested in myself alone, not the group. Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam gave this a famous name, noting that more people than ever in the United States are going ten-pin bowling but fewer than ever are joining teams. He called it "Bowling alone." MIT professor Sherry Turkle calls our age of Twitter, Facebook, and online (rather than face-to-face) friendships, "Alone

together.” Judaism values individuality, not individualism. As Hillel said, “If I am only for myself, what am I?”

Sefat Emet, Exodus, Vaera 26:2

(Rabbi Arthur Green translation)

"Indeed, the children of Israel have not listened to me, so how will Pharaoh, since I am a man of uncircumcised lips?" [Ex: 6:12] **We have already explained that it is because Israel refused to listen that he has these "uncircumcised lips." The prophet prophesies by the power of those who listen.** This is the meaning of "a prophet from your midst...[to him you shall listen]" [Deut. 18:15]; it also says: "Hear, my people, and I will speak" [Ps. 50:7]. **The rabbis teach that a witness must be one who can hear.**

This is what delayed the giving of the Ten Commandments. Speech was in exile as long as those who were to receive Torah had not yet readied themselves to hear the word of God. When it says [of the people in Egypt] that "they did not listen to Moses" [Ex. 6:9], the Midrash says that it was hard for them to abandon their "foreign worship." Thus it is said: "No man would cast away the abominations of his eyes" [Ezek. 20:8]. This does not necessarily refer to idols, but to worship that was foreign to them.

Hearing requires being empty of everything. "Hear, O daughter, and see, give ear; forget your people and your father's house" [Ps. 45:11]. This is the essence of exile today as well: our inability to empty ourselves, to forget this world's vanities so that we empty the heart to hear God's word without any distracting thought. This is the meaning of the verse: "Do not turn after your hearts [or your eyes]" [Num. 15:39]. It was because "no man would cast away the abominations of his eyes" that they walked amid "the idols of Egypt." Had they been ready to hear God's word, they would have been redeemed immediately.

Now Torah has already been given to Israel by "a great voice that did not cease." [Deut. 5:19]. It has never stopped. Each day we say "Hear, O Israel, YHWH our God, YHWH is One" [Deut 6:4]; this is the voice saying: "I am YHWH your God"; it has never stopped. But we have to prepare ourselves to truly hear the Shema' without any distracting thought.

This is why we mention the Exodus [in the Song of the Sea] before the Shema'. By being redeemed from Egypt we are emptied of all distraction and become ready to hear God's word...

Numbers 1:52

(52) The Israelites shall encamp troop by troop, each man with his division and each under his standard.

Numbers 2:1-2

(1) The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: (2) The Israelites shall camp each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house; they shall camp around the Tent of Meeting at a distance.

Maor VaShemesh – BeMidbar

In the Midrash [it is written] He brought me to the house of wine [and his love was a flag upon me]. At the time that the Holy Blessed One was revealed on Mt. Sinai 220,000,000

angels descended with Him, as it says "God's chariot is double two thousand tens of thousands. And they were all arrayed by flags as it says ensigned by tens of thousands. "

When Israel saw that they were arrayed by flags they started to be desirous of the flags. They said, "If only we were arrayed by flags as they are!" that's why it says "He brought me to the house of wine and his love was a flag upon me. They said, "If only He would increase His love upon me!" And similarly it says, "we will rejoice in Your redemption."

The Holy Blessed One said, "You so desired to be arrayed by flags, by your life, I will fulfill your request" as it says, "God will fulfill all of your requests." Immediately, God notified Moshe and said to him, "Array them by flags just as they desired, each person by his flag ensigned."

This midrash is incomprehensible. It says that when Israel saw that they were arrayed by flags they started to be desirous of the flags. And what this desire is needs to be understood. And if it had said that they desired to serve the Blessed God like angels, that should also be the case without flags! [As] it is fitting for a person to long for and desire this, to service in Divine service like an angel.

And it appears from this that it is indeed true that the nation of Benei Yisrael needs to be together in a bond that is strong and mighty, with complete unity, with love and brotherhood and friendship. Nevertheless, a person needs to concentrate on and know their own value and their own type, [to know] to which person they should bring themselves to. As it says in the Midrash, a righteous person (tzaddik) flowers like a palm just as this palm has fruits and leaves and fronds etc. so too in Israel there are those who are masters of scripture, masters of Mishnah, masters of Aggadah.

Therefore, a person needs to recognize his own value, to know which place should be their place and among which people they will feel at ease, which will enable them to achieve the right type of service to their creator.

And if there are those that are the same type as the great ones, they should not say, "I will sit among the small ones and there I will be able to achieve the service of the Blessed Creator" even if it seems that way. And it might even be the case that he is correct, that when he lowers himself, he will comprehend God's essence, nevertheless he should not leave from the boundary of his worth. Rather he should hope for Blessed God to help him so that he could also bring himself to the attribute of submission even when he is among the great. And similarly, someone who is small should not say, "I will push

myself to sit at the head, close to the Rav so that I can hear the words of God emerging from his holy mouth as he speaks, to know wise counsel and strategy for the service of the Blessed creator." Rather, he should sit in the place that is fitting for him and he shouldn't push himself beyond his boundary. He should hope for Blessed God to help him so that he can hear the words of the Rav even from a distant place.

And so, we have found that Israel was camped far from the ark, at a distance of a mil, as it was derived through comparing similar words in different contexts - it says "opposite" in this context and it says "opposite" in the story of Hagar etc. See there. And [they didn't attempt] to ascend the levels and to push themselves so that they are close to the ark where Aharon and Moshe were camped and so that they could hear the words of Torah from their mouths. Rather, each person was camped in the place that was appropriate for them. And [they didn't attempt] to ascend the levels and to push themselves so that they are close to the ark where Aharon and Moshe were camped and so that they could hear the words of Torah from their mouths. Rather, each person was camped in the place that was appropriate for them.

And from where did this desire come that each person would recognize their own worth? The Midrash says, He brought me to the house of wine...And this Midrash itself is in Parashat Yitro. And there it says, is it possible to say that even though there were many of them they were pushing one another? The verse says they were calm and quiet...That is to say that each person remained in their place quietly and calmly, even though it seemed like the revelation of God's presence was stronger where his friend is. Nevertheless, he never moved from the place that was appropriate for him. And that is the meaning of the Midrash mentioned earlier...

