

# Parashat Bamidbar במדבר

**Torah: Numbers 1:1–4:20**

**Haftarah: Hosea 2:1–22**

## The Countings

### General Overview

The Torah was given to the accompaniment of three things: fire, water, and wilderness. Why was the giving of the Torah marked by these three features? To indicate that as these are free to all mankind, so also are the words of Torah free. (Bamidbar Rabbah 1.7)

Many are the words of the Torah, and many are the places in which they have been given. When God first spoke to the children of Israel He spoke through Moshe while they were still slaves in Egypt. He next spoke to them after the Exodus at Mount Sinai. This is where the teachings in the second half of Exodus and all of Leviticus originated. Now in Numbers, or Bamidbar (in the wilderness), God again spoke to Israel. Only this time it was from within the Tent of Meeting. From here, periodically, God would give more revelation as Israel travelled.

Once again, because this is the first parasha in this, the fourth book of Moshe, the name of the Torah portion is also the Hebrew name for the book. Consequently, in this particular commentary we will refer to the name of the book as “Numbers,” and the name of the parasha as “Bamidbar.”

The book of Numbers is the record of the revelation from God in the wilderness of Sinai up to the border of the Promised Land, on the plains of Moab. Numbers is a combination of history and legislation. Its legislation pertains to the sanctuary, the camp, the purification of life, and includes many well known teachings such as the Nazarite vow, the wearing of fringes, the Aaronic Benediction, the ashes of the red heifer, and more. Its history tells the story of how the new nation of freed slaves found themselves wandering in the desert for forty years before they were permitted to enter Canaan.

But, Numbers is no mere chronicle of the outstanding events during the journey in the wilderness. It interprets these events, and shows forth the faithful watchfulness of God in every distress and danger, as well as the stern severity of the divine judgments against rebellion and apostasy.<sup>1</sup>

### Exposition

Numbers is quite an easy book to think through. One of the most common ways to outline it is to divide it according to the location of Israel during their wanderings. We therefore offer you this outline given by Dr. Gordon Wenham:<sup>2</sup>

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| I. Preparations to Enter the Promised Land | 1:1–10:10   |
| II. From Sinai to Kadesh                   | 10:11–12:16 |
| III. Forty Years near Kadesh               | 13:1–19     |
| IV. From Kadesh to the Plains of Moab      | 20:1–22:1   |
| V. Israel in the Plains of Moab            | 22:2–36:13  |

Our study this week will center on the three numberings found in this parasha. Moshe counts all males twenty-years-old and over in chapter 1. Then, in chapters 3 and 4, the Levites are counted. Finally, in chapter 4, Moshe counts the firstborn males of the children of Israel. Let us examine these numberings and the events surrounding them according to the following outline:

- I. Count # 1 — Israelite Males
- II. Count # 2 — Levites
- III. Count # 3 — The Firstborn

In this excerpt from Parashat Bamidbar, we will focus on section I, Count # 1 — Israelite Males.

## **I. Count # 1 — Israelite Males**

The English title for Bamidbar is “Numbers.” This title is derived from the title in the Septuagint translation. Undoubtedly, it stems from the fact that in the first four chapters there are three censuses taken by Moshe. The Hebrew title, Bamidbar, means “in the wilderness.” This describes the location in which the counting took place — in the desert of Sinai.

### **A. Reasons for the Numberings**

The first counting mentioned in chapters 1 and 2 concerns itself with finding out how many males twenty years old (or older) there were. Why did God have Moshe do this? There are several possibilities.

#### **1. The Army**

One of the most common suggestions is that God was preparing an army. Rashbam (Rashi's grandson) offers this explanation:

Take the number of all the congregation. This was on account of the fact that they had to enter Eretz Israel and those from twenty years and upwards were eligible to go forth in the army into battle.<sup>3</sup>

There is further evidence for adopting this interpretation. In 1:49, Moshe is instructed by the Lord not to number the Levites in this particular census. We need to remember that it was their job to maintain and minister in the Mishkan — even during battle. Furthermore, chapter 2 is full of instructions about setting up a formal camp, complete with marching formations and banners. This gives the impression that a military unit is in view here. Elie Munk agrees. He states,

There is an almost military aspect to the early chapters of the book of Numbers: units are formed, leaders are appointed, marching orders are given, and instructions for encampment are issued.<sup>4</sup>

It is also important to see that forming Israel into an organized unit changed their appearance from that of a band of runaway slaves to a cohesive unit functioning together to serve the Lord. If the reason was primarily for military purposes, this would serve to communicate an ominous message to Israel's enemies. The message would tell them that this is no haphazard, nomadic horde. This is a formidable, disciplined fighting machine.

## **2. The Miracle of Existence**

Not contradicting the first suggestion but adding to it, is another interpretation given by Nachmanides. He suggests that the taking of the census served to demonstrate what a miracle God had performed in order to fulfill His promises to Israel.

Here were the children of Israel, only one year after their redemption from slavery in Egypt. One might have expected that because of the intense rigors of harsh servitude to the Egyptians and 400 years of exile that the children of Jacob would have emerged beaten, stricken with disease and fatigue, and dwindled in number. Instead, they were a strong, two to three million member nation. The taking of the census helped to bring to the forefront the fact that “in spite of decimation through suffering and persecution we have increased and multiplied.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, by using numbers and figures, the Holy One was demonstrating the miracle of Israel’s survival.

## **3. Not Just a Cog**

There is something else we can learn from the first census in Bamidbar which complements what has already been said. Notice that Bamidbar does not just give us sum totals such as, “and the children of Israel numbered. . .” “On the contrary; the totals are very specific. For example, verse 5 tells us whom specifically were the ones chosen to help Moshe count, and then verse 20 tells us,

From the descendants of Reuben the firstborn of Israel: All the men twenty years old or more who were able to serve in the army were listed by name, one by one, according to the records of their clans and families.

The same type of wording is used for each tribe throughout the chapter. Each one was counted by head. This gave significance to each individual member of the family and the community. The census had the affect of,

impressing on us the value and sterling worth of each and every soul which is a unique specimen of divine creativity and a world of its own.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, by having this first census taken, the Holy One was stressing the infinite worth of each and every member of the community of Israel. The full impact of this last interpretation is somewhat lost when we remember that according to the text, only males of a certain age were counted. Nonetheless, the principle certainly holds true.

## **4. The Organization**

One further reason for numbering the children of Israel was to facilitate the setting order of the camp configuration. It helped to have a relatively equal number of people on each of the four sides of the Israelite camp.

Chapter 2 describes what the camp order looked liked. It bore all the semblance of order and unity. Not only was their order a set for encampment, it also functioned as a formation for moving: “They will set out in the same order as they encamp, each in his own place under his standard” (2:17).

It was important for God’s army to be ordered and disciplined. Hertz reminds us,

Israel — God’s army — however great in number, is nothing, unless order and discipline reign in the midst thereof. “Order is heaven’s first law.”<sup>7</sup>

The order of the Israelite camp was that of a big square. There were three tribes next to each other on each side of the square. The tribe in the middle was the leader tribe and carried the flag common to the three tribes. Thus, there were twelve tribes (counting Manasseh and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph, separately) on the outer edge of this square. On the inner layer of the square were the sons of Levi: the Merarites on the north, the Gershonites on the west, the Kohathites on the south, and the sons of Aaron on the east. The most important part of this encampment was right in the middle — the Mishkan with the Shekinah. Hence, the Shekinah was guarded first by the Levites, then by the rest of the sons of Jacob.

### ***B. The Camp of the Shekinah***

The most important thing about the Israelite encampment was what was in the middle — the Shekinah. It is interesting that the Talmud mentions that there were three encampments.<sup>8</sup> Dr. Epstein, editor of the Soncino edition of the English *Talmud*, tells us that the outer camp was called the camp of the Israelites, the middle one was the camp of the Levites, and the innermost one was called the camp of the Presence, or Shekinah.<sup>9</sup> From this we get the impression that this was not really Israel’s camp; it was really God’s camp! The two camps that surrounded it were guarding His Presence.

We have therefore, a new picture or metaphor forming from these verses. Up to this point, we have been emphasizing the metaphor of a husband and wife to describe the relationship between God and His people. Now the picture changes to that of an army. Israel is the army of the Lord! God is the Commander-in-Chief who speaks from the midst of His “command post,” the Tent of Meeting. To take the Promised Land there had to be war, but Israel was not able to fight this war on her own. The Divine Presence dwelt in their midst to give commands, directions and encouragement to His hosts, the people of Israel.

One more critical point needs to be made here. The war Israel was to fight was not just a physical one where people would die and blood be shed. On the contrary, it was primarily a spiritual battle. Israel was commissioned by God to make Him known throughout the earth. He gave them a piece of property in which to carry out these “operations.”

However, there were strong spiritual forces set in opposition to Israel — the gods of the Canaanites. Therefore, the God of this universe, the Lord of Hosts (Armies) decided to pitch His tent in the midst of Israel and direct the battle Himself. Israel needed Him to war against the powers and principalities, which were the spiritual realities that the physical idols represented. Hence, having the Mishkan set in the midst of the camp of Israel was like the Commander-in-Chief dwelling right at the heart of the army.

Things have changed very little since the Israelites went against the gods of the Canaanites. Believers everywhere are commanded to,

Put on the full armour of God... for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers

of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:11–12).

Moreover, just as ancient Israel needed to have the “Camp of the Shekinah” among them, so also do we. The Divine Presence should always be in the midst of the children of Israel.”<sup>10</sup>

How can the Divine Presence rest in our midst today? We find the answer to this question in the rest of the passage in Ephesians. When we as individuals and as a community of believers, continually wear the armour that God gave us, we are allowing His Presence to dwell through us. This armour includes: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the sandals of preparation from having the good news of Yeshua, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. Having on this kind of armour we can rest assured that the Presence of God will be with us in each and every battle into which He leads us.

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<sup>1</sup> J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 567.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Numbers (TOTC)*, 54.

<sup>3</sup> Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bamidbar*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Bamidbar*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Leibowitz, op. cit., 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>7</sup> Hertz, op. cit., 573.

<sup>8</sup> B Sanhedrin 42b

<sup>9</sup> Epstein, *Babylonian Talmud*, Soncino Edition, “Sanhedrin,” 275.

<sup>10</sup> Hertz, op. cit., 573.