

## The Almighty's Conscripts *BaMidbar 5780*

Our Sages referred to Sefer BaMidbar as ספר הפקודים, the Book of Counting, more commonly referred to as the Book of Numbers. The reasons for this are simple enough; the Torah's fourth book begins with a counting of the generation which left Egypt, and closes with a counting of the generation which would merit entry into Israel.

However, the Hebrew term פקודה, in addition to connoting a numerical count, has an addition meaning, that of a command. It is a term with a military implication, one entirely appropriate for a census which enumerated all men over twenty as the nascent armed forces, כל יוצא צבא בישראל. The prevalence of trumpets and flags in the Torah's description of the Jewish camp are also unmistakably militaristic elements. What are we to make of these references?

Many of the commentators, such as Rashbam, assert a pragmatic perspective. The Jewish people were about to commence hostilities with the Canaanite nations, and knowing the size of the fighting force was imperative before the outset of the campaign. Yet, this answer alone may not be sufficient, for the reason that even the tribe of Levi, who were not included in the fighting force, are also described as being counted לצבא צבא, in association with their tabernacle based work, לעבוד עבודה באוהל מועד. Given the fact that both the term פקודים, as well as צבא, are extended to the tribe of Levi as well, we might pursue a different approach than the most straightforward understanding of the significance of these militaristic elements.

Military service, at its finest, is a celebration of some of humanity's finest virtues; discipline, duty, self-sacrifice, integrity, mutual responsibility, and unrelenting accountability. By employing military terms and concepts in describing God's enumeration of the Jewish people, we are reminded that we are meant to bring these cherished virtues to bear in service of the world's ultimate commanding officer, the Almighty.

Every Jew must self-identify as one of the Almighty's conscripts. We must try to demand at least as much of ourselves in service of God as soldiers do for their armed services.

During these challenging days, I have never been prouder of our community's willingness to behave exactly in this fashion. You have demonstrated exceptional kindness to those who bear more of the burden of social distancing, and you have demonstrated great resilience. You have undertaken sacrifices that none of us would have ever imagined were necessary.

If our entire people have been an army, I could not be prouder to be part of this exceptional division.