

Shavuot 2018 Sermon Slam
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Hazzan Linda Sue Sohn
Temple Aliyah, Needham

I love numbers. And this week, that can be taken in a bunch of ways. This morning's Torah reading of Parashat B'midbar is the first parashah in the Book of Numbers, so named in English because the first thing we read about is God telling Moses to take a census – an accounting – of all the males over the age of 20, in other words, all those who are of fighting age.

The census was conducted tribe by tribe. In Chapter 1 verse 46, we are given the combined tally of all the tribal totals.

וַיְהִיו כָּל־הַפְּקוּדִים

All those that were numbered were

שֵׁשׁ־מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף

Six hundred thousand

וּשְׁלֹשָׁת אֲלָפִים

And three thousand

וַחֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת וַחֲמֵשִׁים:

And five hundred and fifty.

Let's think about that for a minute. 603,550? This number seems inflated, so let's take a closer look at the Hebrew. I find it curious that both the word אֶלֶף and the word אֶלְפִים are translated as “thousand”.

It turns out that there is some scholarship to suggest that אֶלֶף might not mean “thousand”, but rather, a military unit of 5 or 6 men.

Moreover, there could be another crucial change in the translation. The ו in וַיִּשְׁלַח is most often translated as the conjunctive “and”. In this verse, however, I contend that it makes more sense to translate it as the word “or”.

(as in Exodus 21:17, which says “He who curses his mother or his father shall surely be put to death.”)

With these insights, a new translation comes to light:

וַיִּהְיוּ כָּל-הַפְּקוּדִים

All those that were numbered were

שֵׁשׁ-מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף

Six hundred military units

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶלְפִים וַחֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת וַחֲמֵשִׁים:

Or (more specifically)... three thousand And five hundred and fifty.

If one counts a military unit as 6 men, then 600 times 6 is 3,600 men. And 3,550 is pretty close to 3,600. In other words, I think this verse gives us two totals – the general and the specific. And now, it makes more sense to my number-loving self.

As so many passages in the Torah do, it all adds up. Even this one seemingly simple verse leads to what I see is the overarching theme of the Torah. In assessing the numerical strength of the defense force, the Israelites affirm anew their partnership with God as they move together to reach the Promised Land.