

PARASHAT BEMIDBAR

Numbers 1:1–4:20

The second book of the Torah, Exodus, concludes with a description for setting up the sanctuary on the first day of the first month of the second year after the Israelites leave Egypt. The fourth book of the Torah, known in Hebrew as *Bemidbar*, or “in the desert,” or in English as Numbers, begins with God commanding Moses to take a census of the entire Israelite community. The commandment is given on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites’ departure from Egypt. All males over the age of twenty are counted, and it is reported that there is a total of 603,550. This number excludes 22,000 Levites, who are exclusively responsible for all services of the sanctuary and are to camp around the sanctuary at all times. After counting all firstborn Israelite males over the age of one month, Moses is instructed to compare their number of 22,273 with the total of 22,000 Levites and to charge a redemption tax for the additional 273. It is to be paid to Aaron and his sons for service to the sanctuary. Moses also lists and counts the Kohathites separately from the Levites since the Kohathites are responsible for lifting and carrying the sacred objects of the sanctuary. They are not to be present when the sanctuary is either dismantled or set up.

OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

One month after setting up the sanctuary “in the desert” (*bemidbar*), Moses is instructed by God to number all Israelite males over the age of twenty, all who are able to bear arms. The census is taken according to the

tribal houses of the Israelites: Reuben; Simeon; Judah; Issachar; Zebulun; the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh; Benjamin; Dan; Asher; Gad; and Naphtali. Moses and Aaron register all the males. Their total is 603,550.

The Levites, the sons of Levi, are not counted in the census since they do not bear arms but are exclusively responsible for the sanctuary and its



rituals. They are commanded to camp around the sanctuary at all times and to assist Aaron the priest in all the rituals.

•2•

Moses counts the Levites from the age of one month. The total comes to 22,000. He also numbers the firstborn males among the Israelites. That total comes to 22,273.

God tells Moses that the Levites will carry out the work of the sanctuary and free the rest of the Israelites from such ritual responsibilities. However, since there are an additional 273 firstborn Israelites, a special tax of five shekels per head is to be paid as a donation, freeing them from their sanctuary duties. The money is given to Aaron and his sons to be used at their discretion.

•3•

Dismantling and preparing the sanctuary for movement from place to place is to be done, exclusively, by Aaron and his sons. All objects of the sanctuary, the screens, curtains, ark, bowls, lampstands, are to be covered with dolphin skin or special cloths.

•4•

Moses and Aaron are told to take a count of the Kohathites, the descendants of Kohath, one of the three sons of Levi. Those between the ages of thirty and fifty are assigned to lift and carry the sanctuary parts when they are moved from place to place.

THEMES

Parashat Bemidbar contains two important themes:

1. The meaning of *midbar*, or "desert," in Jewish tradition.
2. The significance of counting the Israelites.

PEREK ALEF: *Why Does So Much of Such Importance in Jewish History Happen in the Midbar—in the Desert?*

In 1838–1839, the famous Scottish artist David Roberts (1796–1864) journeyed throughout the Middle East. His pictures and personal diary are valuable records of what he saw and experienced. Traveling by foot and camel caravan through the Sinai desert, Roberts and his party encountered searing heat by day and shivering cold at night. His diary describes the ragged peaks, the black, rugged, desolate summits, “the dark frowning front of Mount Sinai,” and the barren desert.

Commenting on his climb through the pass toward Mount Sinai, Roberts says, “Although I had crossed the most rugged passes of the Alps and made from Chamouny the whole circuit of Mount Blanc, I never found a path so rude and difficult as that which we were now ascending.” Another member of his party writes, “I had never seen a spot more wild and desolate.” (David Roberts; Nachman Ran, editor, *The Holy Land*, Wellfleet Books, New York, 1982, pp. V-27 - V-35)

Those who have traveled through the triangular-shaped Sinai peninsula, situated between Egypt’s Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Eilat, know its variegated landscape. In the north, along the Mediterranean Sea, one finds endless stretches of high, shifting sand dunes. Further south are jagged limestone cliffs and mountains relieved by vast rocky plateaus. In the southern area are tall granite mountains, valleys, and gorges eroded from the melt of winter rains and snow and imbedded with rich veins of copper and turquoise. Even today, there are fewer than one hundred thousand inhabitants in this arid and unfriendly region.

It is into the desolate landscape of the Sinai desert that the newly liberated Jewish people wander and remain for forty years. Students of Jewish history and Torah literature have constantly asked through the centuries, “Why did they stay so long?” Why after bitter years of Egyptian oppression did Moses not lead them directly to the Land of Israel? Indeed, why is the Torah given to the people of Israel in such a

hostile environment rather than in the comfort of the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey? Finally, why does the Torah devote the entire book of *Bemidbar* and much of Deuteronomy to the Israelites’ struggle for survival in such an inhospitable place?

Torah commentators offer various answers.

In our own times, historian and Israeli statesman Abba Eban suggests that the liberated Israelites were locked in the Sinai for strategic reasons. They had intended to return to the land of their ancestors, but they were few in number and incapable of taking on the Philistine armies, which controlled the shorter, more direct, northern route to Canaan, or the Canaanite armies along the Negev border. Eban explains that it took forty years of wandering “from oasis to oasis” before they were strong enough to reconquer their land. (*My People: The Story of the Jews*, Random House, New York, 1984, pp. 15–16)

While he does not disagree with Eban’s observation, Israeli historian Nachman Ran sees more in the desert experience than a forced period of wandering and building strategic strength. The desert experience, says Ran, was a time of nation building and religious development. “To a people whose entire living generation had seen only the level lands of Egypt, the Israelite march into this region of mountain magnificence, with its sharp and splintered peaks and profound valleys, must have been a perpetual source of astonishment and awe. No nobler school could have been conceived for training a nation of slaves into a nation of freemen or weaning a people from the grossness of idolatry to a sense of the grandeur and power of the God alike of Nature and Mind.” (*The Holy Land*, p. V-27)

For Ran, the *midbar* is a “school” where the Israelites mature out of slavery and idolatry into a free, powerful people. Within its unique, barren, and dangerous environment they learn respect for the wonders of nature and the importance of each person to the community. No longer slaves, they must now bear the burden of their survival. Their desert journey teaches them mutual dependence and loyalty to one another and to the ethical and ritual commandments that are meant to uplift life with sacred meanings. In Egypt they were condemned to live by the will

of others. In the *midbar* they become free human beings responsible to God and to themselves for every choice they make.

Other commentators believe that the experience of the Israelites in the desert toughened them for all the trials they would face in the future. They suffer hunger and thirst, are attacked by enemies seeking to destroy them, and are forced to endure discomfort and constant danger. Their suffering strengthens their will to survive. It gives birth to a conviction that, no matter how oppressed or beaten, they will ultimately emerge victorious over those who threaten their destruction.

This desert experience later becomes a model for Jewish behavior. During times of persecution Jews would look back upon their wanderings across the hostile Sinai desert. Recalling its trials and triumphs, they would draw inspiration and determination to overcome all forces set against them.

Rabbi Akiba stretches this lesson about the importance of Israelite suffering in the desert to include another dimension. Their trials and suffering, he says, "allowed them to merit receiving the priceless gift of Torah." Akiba's assertion is a bold one: The experience of pain and disappointment brings special rewards. (*Sanhedrin* 101a)

Writer Helen Keller, blind and deaf from childhood, may have been saying the same thing when she commented, "I thank God for my handicaps for, through them, I have found myself, my work, and my God." Her rewards grew out of her striving to surmount her disabilities.

Sometimes the reward of our own suffering is a greater appreciation of the pain of others and the determination to do something to relieve it. Bearing distress often enlarges our sympathy. It provides a new wisdom and perspective from which to disarm violence and injustice with the pursuit of compassion, truth, cooperation, and peace. One of Akiba's best friends, Simeon ben Azzai, might have had this in mind when he taught that "the reward for doing a mitzvah is the opportunity to do another mitzvah. (*Avot* 4:2)

On the other hand, Akiba may have had in mind the reward, or sense of satisfaction, that

comes from suffering for the sake of a righteous cause. Jews have often been persecuted for loyalty to their faith and people. Akiba himself was tortured and died a martyr's death at the hands of the Romans. Yet, even in the midst of his agony, he whispered to his students, "Now I understand the words, 'You shall love *Adonai* your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your power.'" In the midst of his painful death, he reached the conclusion that his reward for suffering was the knowledge that he was giving his life for the sake of his people and faith.

Why in the wilderness?

Philosopher Philo explains that the Torah was given in the wilderness because cities are filled with corruption, luxury, idolatry, and other evils. He also argues that, for one to be pure and ready to receive the Torah, one must be separated from all the vices of the city. (On the Decalogue, I)

Torah was given in the desert to teach that we must consider ourselves open like the midbar in order to learn Torah. (Nedarim 55b)

Just as the desert contains nothing but layers of sand, so, too, the human body is composed of nothing but dust. But, just as the desert was transformed into a holy place by the appearance of the Divine Presence, so, too, with human beings. They become a source of greatness if they allow their spiritual spark to dominate their actions. (Rabbi Mordechai Katz, Lilmod U'lamade: From the Teachings of Our Sages, Jewish Education Program Publications, New York, 1978, p. 129)

Several early rabbinic commentators disagree with Akiba's claim that the Israelites were rewarded for their suffering in the desert with the gift of Torah. Instead they argue that God deliberately chose the desolate *midbar* as the most appropriate environment for giving the Torah. In supporting their contention, they cite a number of reasons.

The barren *midbar*, say the rabbis, belongs to no one. It is no-man's-land. For that reason God

selects it as the best place for giving the Torah because the Torah is for all peoples. Like the desert, the Torah is open and free, accessible to everyone. It is neither a secret doctrine nor an exclusive one. Anyone at anytime is welcome to accept it and make it one's own. This, say the rabbis, explains why the Torah is given in no-man's-land. It is a gift to all human beings. (*Mechilta, Bachodesh and Yitro*)

Another teacher suggests that the Torah was given in the *midbar* and not in the Land of Israel to prevent arguments among the people of Israel. Had it been given in the territory of one tribe, that tribe might have said, "Look at us. We are superior to all other tribes since the Torah was given on our land." To prevent such claims and the jealousy and misunderstandings that might have resulted from them, God presents the Torah to the people of Israel in the *midbar*, which belongs to no one. In this way they are taught that no Jew is superior to another and that all Jews have responsibility for carrying out the commandments of the Torah. (*Numbers Rabbah, Chukat, 19:26*)

Other commentators believe that the Torah was given in the wilderness of Sinai to teach that, as the desert is open to all influences, those who wish to make the Torah their own must also be open to all its various teachings. In other words, the best students are not those who close their minds or have no patience for the views of others but rather those who make themselves like the desert. They are receptive to new ideas, willing to consider new perspectives. They take time to examine and experiment with novel views, unafraid to try innovative suggestions. "If people are not as free as the desert," one interpreter says, "then they are not worthy to receive the Torah." (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 107a*)

Modern interpreter Rabbi M. Miller of Gateshead, England, claims that "of all the places in the world, it was just in a place of drought and desolation, of barrenness and blackness, that God was welcomed with honor." Miller's view is that the desert was the appropriate place for the spiritual message of Torah because the desert is not corrupted by previous growth and development. It remains desolate, wild and pure, without need of alteration.

Miller's point is that "the Torah is given to those who make themselves as a wilderness, who purge themselves of impure influences and desires, of all aspirations and interests that are incompatible with the spirit of the Torah." Such influences, he explains, may include selfishness, the urge to covet what others possess, the corruption of friends or family, vicious habits, impatience, or cruelty to others. All of these influences block the attainment of "higher levels of moral and spiritual greatness." Preconceived ideas and prejudices blind us to new ideas and cripple us with dangerous habits. (*Shabbat Shiurim, 5729, pp. 215-221*)

Rabbi Miller's contention that the giving of the Torah in the desert contains a significant spiritual and ethical lesson is shared by Rabbi Morris Adler. However, Adler makes a different point. He argues that we live "in a desert age." The "voice of God does not sound clear and true in such a time." Confusion over right and wrong, faith, and reason prevails. In such a time it feels as if God were absent.

The reminder that the Torah was given in such a wilderness, says Adler, teaches that "there is no human condition . . . so dark that it can completely shut out God." Quite the opposite is the case. "God speaks, and sometimes . . . speaks most clearly in the wilderness." Often, explains Adler, people find themselves in difficult situations, overwhelmed by worries, stress, and pain. They are treated unjustly and feel themselves "succumbing to a sense of hopelessness." Precisely at such times it is helpful to remember that God gave the Torah in the desert, not in the lush land of milk and honey. "Whatever your particular desert, I say to you, 'Listen. Listen, for even there God speaks. . . .'" (*The Voice Still Speaks*, Bloch Publishing Company, New York, 1969, pp. 265-269)



Peli

Expanding Adler's insight, Pinchas H. Peli sees the desert as a metaphor, describing the psychological and spiritual realms of human existence.

There is a "wilderness" within each person, a "desert" where selfish desires rule, where one looks out only for one's own needs. No person is ever satisfied in the desert. There is constant complaining about lack of food and water, the scorching hot days and bitter cold nights. Anger, frustration, disagreements, and hunger prevail. The Torah is given in the desert, Peli argues, "to conquer and curb the demonic wilderness within human beings." The lesson here is that, "if human beings do not conquer the desert, it may eventually conquer them. There is no peaceful coexistence between the two. . . ." (*Jerusalem Post*, June 1, 1985, p. 17)

Why does so much of such importance in Jewish history happen in the desert? As we have seen, there are many answers to that question. One more suggests itself.

According to Jewish tradition, when you see the *midbar*, you are to say, "Be praised *Adonai* our God for the wondrous works of creation." The wilderness has always inspired awe and respect. Its quiet is mysterious and invites contemplation. One goes to the wilderness, as Moses did, to find new perspectives on life, to deepen spiritual awareness, and to gain clearer insights into moral concerns. Perhaps that is why the desert plays such a significant role in Jewish tradition. The *midbar* is the place where liberated Israelites receive the Torah, clarify their strategies for entering the Promised Land, and bond together as a people ready to face their uncertain future.

PEREK BET: *Why Count the Israelites?*

Bemidbar, or the Book of Numbers, opens with a date. We are told that, on the first day of the second month in the second year following the Exodus from Egypt, Moses was commanded to gather the Israelites together. A year has passed since they were liberated. They have wandered in the desert and stood together at Mount Sinai to receive the laws of God. Now, on the first day of the second month, a year after leaving Egypt, Moses is told to take a census of the people.

Interpreters who study the words of the instruction given to Moses call attention to their

peculiarity. The words *seu et rosh* may be translated "take a census," but literally they mean "lift up," or "mark the head." As a result, their true meaning remains unclear.

Furthermore, commentators point out that this census at the beginning of Numbers differs from another census previously mentioned in Exodus 30:12-15. There we are given no precise date of the counting. Instead Moses is told to record the names of each person twenty years or older and to require payment of a half-shekel as an offering to God. By contrast, in the census of Numbers, no payment is mentioned or required.

Several questions arise: Why this numbering of the Israelites a year after the Exodus? What is the meaning of the words *seu et rosh*? Why does the Torah provide two versions of the census? What, if any, is the relationship between them?

For purposes of clarity, let's begin by answering the last question first. Early rabbinic commentators maintain that God commands Moses to number the people of Israel at least four times: once just after leaving Egypt (Exodus 12:37); another time after they build the golden calf; once again to protect them from the spread of a plague (Exodus 30:11); and a year after they depart from Egypt and are wandering in the desert (Numbers 1:1ff.)

Why are the people counted so many times?

The answer, say the rabbis, is to demonstrate God's love for the people of Israel. God, they explain, is like a king who possesses a fabulous treasure. He adores it. Each day he takes it in his hands and caresses it. He counts it to make sure that nothing is lost. So it is, say the rabbis, with the people of Israel. God loves to count them and, with each counting, declares, "I have created all the magnificent stars of the universe, yet it is Israel who will do My will." (*Numbers Rabbah* 2:19)



Rashi

Building upon this interpretation, Rashi explains that each census is a sign both of God's love for and reliance upon the people of Israel.

Just as we count those things or persons important to us and “count” upon them to care for us and, if necessary, defend us, so God counts upon every Jew to be a partner in the task of *tikkun olam*, or “improving and enhancing the world.” Each census is a loving analysis of God’s agents—or of God’s “treasure.” What we have here is a sign that God not only loves us but needs us. God is “counting” upon us to carry out our part of the covenant-partnership. (Commentary on Numbers 1:1)

RASHBAM

Rashi’s grandson, Rashbam, disagrees. He contends that the census has nothing to do with God’s love for the Jewish people. Instead he argues that the counting of all those over the age of twenty years is a strategic matter. “They are preparing to enter the Land of Israel and require an army ready to go forth into battle.” The census is taken to determine how many soldiers are eligible for the military challenge facing them. (Commentary on Numbers 1:1)



Ramban (Nachmanides)

Agreeing with Rashbam’s view, Nachmanides explains that the census is an illustration of the Torah’s warning against relying upon miracles. The people must fight to reclaim their land. It will not be handed to them by a miracle. The census is a means of organizing and enlisting them. It makes it clear that victory depends on each of them and on the coordination of their talents and efforts.

People are assets: rules for successful companies

Treat people as adults. Treat them as partners; treat them with dignity; treat them with respect. Treat them—not capital spending and

automation—as the primary source of productivity gains. These are the fundamental lessons from excellent companies. . . . In other words, if you want productivity and the financial reward that goes with it, you must treat your workers as your most important asset. (Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., In Search of Excellence, Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., New York, 1982, p. 238)

Rabbi Jacob J. Weinstein enlarges Rashbam’s interpretation. He points out that the census was “a model for large scale administrative competence.” Moses asks for and records the name of each person. He organizes the census by tribe, separating the responsibilities of the Levites, who care for the services and security of the sanctuary. Each tribe, organized by family groups, is divided into four sections and assigned its own standard with a special identifying symbol.

What we have in the census is not simply a call-up for military service but the creative organizing of a community. The census is a practical necessity. It enables the Israelites to identify individual talents and abilities—the important assets of leadership required for victory. Through the process of counting the people, Moses is building an organizational structure and creating a design and purpose to Israelite society, even as it wanders in the Sinai desert. (*The Place of Understanding*, Bloch Publishing Company, New York, 1959, pp. 97–99)

Seu et rosh

Nachmanides notes that the words seu et rosh, usually translated “take a census,” literally translate as “lift up the head. . . .” These words are meant to teach us that “we are to honor those who are pious and generous and criticize those who are not.” (Commentary on Numbers 1:1)

Rabbi Pinchas teaches that there is a secret meaning in the words seu et rosh. They are also the words used by an executioner who says, “Take off so and so’s head.” In the Torah these words teach that, if the people of Israel are

worthy in good deeds, they will keep their heads and live; if not, they will lose their heads and die. (Numbers Rabbah 1:11)

In contrast with the practical organizing function of a census, Nachmanides suggests a psychological purpose. The people of Israel know their history. The patriarch Jacob has led them to Egypt with only seventy people. There they suffer oppression, sickness, plague, and death. To bolster their morale and build a sense of confidence in their strength, Moses calls for a census. Through it he demonstrates to them that, while they went to Egypt with only 600 people, they are now a force of 603,550 ready to defeat any army that threatens them.

Furthermore, Nachmanides explains, the census is conducted by Moses in a special manner. Instead of just numbering the people, those taking the poll are instructed by Moses "to do so in a manner that will give honor and importance to each person." Thus, says Nachmanides, Moses tells the poll takers, "Do not ask the head of each family for the number of people in the family. Rather, invite each person to pass before me. Take down that person's name, and let each one feel honored to be part of the census." By numbering each person, Moses encourages pride and feelings of self-worth. (Commentary on Numbers 1:45)



Leibowitz

Contemporary interpreter Nehama Leibowitz underscores the importance of Nachmanides' approach. She points out one of the great social dangers of our times: political, social, economic, and religious ideologies "that subject the individual to the mass and see the individual as a cog in the machine of the state, assuming that if one human being is destroyed there is always another one to take his place." Instead, Leibowitz continues, "Nachmanides emphasizes that the census was personal and individual . . . impressing on us the value and critical worth of each and every

soul, which is a unique creation of God and a world of its own." (*Studies in Bemidbar*, World Zionist Organization, Jerusalem, 1980, pp. 12–15)

Each is important

They are not just like animals or material objects, but each one has an importance of his own like a king or priest. Indeed, God shows special love toward them, and this is the significance of mentioning each one of them by name and status. They were all equal and individual in status. (Isaac ben Moses Arama, Akedat Yitzhak)

The census brings home the message to each and every one. Each sees that one does not stand alone but is a part of the totality of things. Yet, the entire world is dependent on each individual. . . . By being counted, we know our place in and our worth to the community at large. (Yehuda Nachshoni in Studies in the Weekly Parashah, quoting the view of Shaloh from his Shenei Luchot ha-Berit)



Hirsch

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch argues that the census was more than a means of bolstering Israelite morale or of assuring each person's importance to the community. It is not enough, Hirsch points out, to have your name listed on a register or to take your place in a line behind a standard.

In Hirsch's view, the significance of the census is twofold.

First, as indicated in Exodus 30:12, a mandatory payment of a half-shekel is required from every person for the upkeep of the sanctuary. "Through this contribution," explains Hirsch, we learn that "a Jew is only 'counted' as belonging [to the people] by *doing something* for the sanctuary."

Payment of the half-shekel as a tax is the way

in which each Israelite demonstrates support for the community. The funds are pooled and used to finance schools and synagogues, to care for the aging, and to provide for the poor and homeless, the sick and needy. A Jew is "counted" upon by the community for support and is only a part of the census—of those who count—when *doing something* to benefit the entire community.

Second, Hirsch sees more than a lesson of community responsibility and generosity in the ancient Israelite census. He notes that the census is arranged as a valuable model of community organization. "The individuals first group themselves into families, the families into tribes, and finally the tribes into one common 'house of Israel.'"

Hirsch points out that, while each individual is unique, so, too, are the family and the tribe. All are linked "by a common inner factor, and each one of them must feel itself to be . . . a concrete and important part of this unity." In the census each person stands out with a name, family connections, and tribal affiliation, yet each feels a part of the whole community. "The greatest diversity of tribal and family specialties . . . and dispositions was diligently and carefully nurtured," explains Hirsch, yet "every tribe in its specialty and every family in its own peculiarity have to work at the common task of the house of Israel. . . ."

The census, therefore, is a model of community responsibility for the people of Israel and all humanity. Essentially, it underscores not only the importance of preserving and promoting individual rights and creativity but also strengthens the bonds of family, diverse religious, social, political, and economic associations as the means

of ensuring a secure human future. Hirsch concludes that "every member of the family is counted by name, so that each one joins the whole, conscious of the importance of his personality to the nation." (Commentary on Numbers 1:1-2)

For Jewish interpreters the ancient census of the Israelites a year after the Exodus from Egypt was much more than an ordinary numbering of people. They elaborated upon its method and meanings, underscoring lessons about the role and responsibilities of each individual to family, nation, and all of humanity. Their creative views provide us with lasting insights to ponder.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Do problems, suffering, and hardships really help to "strengthen" a person or a people? What have they contributed to Jewish survival throughout the ages?
2. Poet T.S. Eliot, using the metaphor of the desert, once referred to contemporary society as a "wasteland." Would you agree? Why would Jewish tradition claim that the Torah was given in the desert, in a "wasteland"? What do we learn about coping with modern life from the ancient experience of the Israelites in the desert?
3. What are the lessons we can draw from the census of the Israelites? How can they be applied to our responsibilities to family, community, nation, and the whole human family?