

Drash for Shabbat Bamidbar by Dr. Eliyanah Powers

The parashah Bamidbar is the beginning of the book of Numbers. It continues the story of Exodus and occurs 13 months after the exodus from Egypt. Leviticus has interrupted this narrative, with its descriptions of legal precedents and priestly obligations.

Exodus ended with erection of the Tabernacle; Numbers begins one month later with the taking of the census, with instructions on how to use those numbered in the census to protect the Tabernacle.

Each tribe is counted separately, with differing numbers for each. The leaders of the tribes are Jacob's twelve sons. They are Reuben, Simeon, Gad, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Mannasah, Benjamin, Dan, Asher, and Naphtali.

Numbers 1:45-46 translates as: "All the Israelite males aged 20 years and over, enrolled by ancestral houses, all those in Israel who were able to bear arms -all who were enrolled came to 603,550."

This wording cements the fact that this census was a military one; women, children, and young men were not counted. The Levites and the priests were an exception to the fighting force; they were instead charged with the guarding of the Holy of Holies. These consisted of the Merarites (Levites), the Gershonites (Levites), the Kohathites (Levites) and the Priests Moses, Aaron, and their sons.

After the counting of the census, God commanded Moses and Aaron as to the exact area where each tribe should camp. These formations surrounded the Tent of Meeting, which was in turn surrounded by the Levites and the priests. This formidable phalanx comprised a solid wall of protection for the Tent and its contents.

We carry this idea forward in our time; we respect the Torah as though she were a living being. She is written by hand with specially made ink, on parchment from a living animal. Even the stitches binding the pages are of all-natural material. We carry her through the congregation, not daring to touch her with our hands, but with the prayerbook or tallis only. We house her in her own ark and show respect by standing when she is taken out.

I miss being in the presence of the Torah scroll. The pandemic and its resulting quarantines have kept me, and us, from this oh so important and powerful friend. I look forward to the time when we as a congregation can again act as the twelve tribes and surround our scrolls with protection, love, and respect.

Shabbat shalom.