

Torah During the Time of COVID-19
Parashat B'Midbar
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This week, we begin a new book of Torah called Numbers. In Hebrew, the name is B'Midbar meaning "In the Wilderness." This portion begins two years after the exodus from Egypt.

The portion of B'Midbar begins with a census of the clans of the Children of Israel. It states (Numbers 1:2-3):

Take a census of the whole of Israelite company [of fighters] by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms.¹

This census will be the first of many taken during this book of Torah. What is interesting about this particular census is that it counts only those males of fighting age 20 years and over. The total number is 603, 550. The portion continues with the placement of those counted within the encampment so that the front, rear and flanks of the camp of Israel are protected when they are moving and when they are encamped. The formation stemming from this census is a means of creating a physical and a sacred area of protection.

Left out of this census were males under 20 years of age, Levites and females.

Our country is currently undergoing a census. Census 2020 will determine the number of people living within our nation's borders. Yet, it is not just the numbers that are important but the distribution of population. When Moses and Aaron took the census according to God's instructions, they keep count by tribes. Translating that system into our world today, we could interpret the tribes as communities. The census that we are participating in this year will account for not just how many are residing in our country but also where they are living. This gleaning of information is important because the results will be used for the allocation of government funds for the next ten years. For our community, the census will determine the funds for public schools, hospitals, social services and community monies just to cite a few examples. These monies are important for our community not just for those we know but also for those in need of services. Shelters like the Thurman Brisbane Center's budget will count on the governmental allocation given to Stafford County. If you have not done so already, stand up and be counted.

Our own congregational community is also undergoing a census of sorts. This census is our dues we pay in order for our congregation to be able to operate. This past week, we received an email from our leadership asking us to stand up and be counted for Beth Sholom Temple. In the Torah, many times when a census was taken a half shekel was collected as a means of pay into the kuppah, the communal collection. Our dues are that half shekel. We are following

¹ Eskenazi, Tamara Cohen, Weiss (2008). *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, pp. 791-792.

the formula set forth thousands of years ago in order for us to support our congregational community. Also, stated in the email was the announcement that dues will remain at the same level as last year. In the wilderness, whenever a census was taken, if one was unable to pay the half shekel, the individual or family was allowed to pay what they could afford. Our leadership will work with you so that your membership does not become a hardship. Your involvement in our community and you being counted as a member is our ultimate goal. While the recent message does not ask you to do anything at this time, we look forward to you confirming your membership in the community when you are asked to do so later this summer. Please participate in BST's census when you open your email. Unlike in the Torah where the census is mandatory, BST's census is voluntary. We hope you will participate and be counted in our numbers.

As we look towards Shabbat and the beginning of the new Book of B'Midbar, let us not wander in the wilderness without being counted in our community for 40 years. May we stand up and be counted and participate as an official number in our community and our nation.

Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi Jennifer Weiner