

בְּמִדְבָּר

BEMIDBAR/IN THE WILDERNESS Bemidbar/Numbers 1:1-4:20

This week we begin the **4th** book of the **Torah**. Its **English** name, “**Numbers**,” reflects the **statistics** that the first chapter begins with. Its Hebrew title, “**Bemidbar**,” reminds us of the **covenant** that is consummated between יהוה and the children of Israel “**in the wilderness**” (bemidbar - בְּמִדְבָּר) of Sinai. **Bemidbar** begins only **13 months** after the beginning of the **exodus**, and only **days** from the **ends of the books of Shemot and Vayikra**. This is where we are exactly in terms of **time**:

***Bemidbar 1:1** Now יהוה spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying:*

The time frame is interesting because it means that we have just **passed** the **anniversary** of the **1st Pesach** (Passover) **since Egypt**. Oddly enough, we see that **Bemidbar** is **not** in **chronological order** since in **chapter 9**, the **instructions for Pesach** and the fact that it was **celebrated** are spoken of in **chapter 9**:

***Bemidbar 9:1** Now יהוה spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the first month of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: ² "Let the children of Israel keep the Passover at its appointed time. ³ "On the fourteenth day of this month, at twilight, you shall keep it at its appointed time. According to all its rites and ceremonies you shall keep it." ⁴ So Moshe told the children of Israel that they should keep the Passover. ⁵ And they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month, at twilight, in the Wilderness of Sinai; according to all that the יהוה commanded Moshe, so the children of Israel did.*

I'd like to know **more details** about that **first Passover** that they celebrated in the **wilderness**. What a wonderful celebration it must have been, as they recalled their **release** from the **bondage of slavery**. The **parting of the Red Sea**, the remarkable **giving of the Torah** at Mt. Sinai, the **building of the Tabernacle**, the **miracle of the manna**, the **water from the rock**, the **Shekhinah glory**, and the **golden calf fiasco** were just some of the **remembrances** of the **previous year**. Now as we begin our Torah parasha, יהוה turns their attention to a **census**.

The question comes to mind...what was the **reason** for **counting the people**? Surely יהוה **already knows how many people** there are. Indeed **He even knows** how many **hairs** are on our **head**:

***Matthew 10:29** "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. ³⁰ "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.*

Obviously, יהוה had **other reasons** for **numbering the Israelites**. We are told there was a **military** motivation for the **numbering**:

***Bemidbar 1:2** "Take a census ... every male individually, ³ "from twenty years old and above -- all who are able to go to war in Israel. You and Aharon shall number them by their armies.*

We are rationally thinking humans, and **numbers matter** to us. We definitely **prefer** to **out-number** our **enemies** when we go to **war**. This has **never** been the case for **Israel**:

Devarim 7:7 " יְהוָה did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples;

Even today **Israel** is **still greatly out-numbered** as a **nation**. In fact, **more and more nations** of the world seem to be **uniting against her**. This very week, **Israel's leaders** are being **pressured** to **bend** to the **position of the "majority"** of the **world**. Will **Israel yield** to the **"numbers"**? Perhaps the **world** should learn a **lesson** from **Bemidbar**. **Numbers do not count** where **His people** are concerned. **יהוה plus His people** are **ALWAYS** a **majority**. When we **walk in His ways**, He gives us a **promise** concerning our **enemies**:

Psalms 81:13 "Oh, that My people would listen to Me, That Israel would walk in My ways! ¹⁴ I would soon subdue their enemies, And turn My hand against their adversaries.

2 Chronicles 20:6 and said: "O יְהוָה Elohim of our fathers, are You not Elohim in heaven, and do You not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations, and in Your hand is there not power and might, so that no one is able to withstand You?"

The **knowledge** of their **"numbers"** would **test the Israelite's faith**. We will soon read of one of their **failures**, when the **ten spies** are **intimidated** by the **people** inhabiting the **Promised Land**:

*Bemidbar 13:27 Then they told him, and said: "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸ "Nevertheless **the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large**; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ "The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan.".... "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we.... and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."*

There also appear to be **additional reasons** for **counting** the **Israelites**. Let's look at the **command** for the **census**:

Bemidbar 1:2 "Take a census (שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁוֹ) of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male individually, ³ "from twenty years old and above..."

Traditionally, the Hebrew words שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁוֹ are translated as **"take a census"** or **"count the people,"** but literally this expression means **"lift the head"**. It is interesting that this is **not the first time** that this **choice of words** has been used in the **Torah**. During the time that **Yosef was jailed** with the **Pharaoh's butler and baker**, these words were used in **Yosef's interpretations** of both of their **dreams**. **Yosef** told the **butler** that **Pharaoh** would **"lift his head"** and **elevate him back into the court**:

Bereshith 40:13 "Now within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your place..."

Yosef had to tell the baker, however, that “**lifting his head**” pointed to his **impending death**:

Bereshith 40:19 "Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head from you and hang you on a tree; and the birds will eat your flesh from you."

In **Bereshith**, the “**lifting of the head**” is associated with the **impulses** of the human **Pharaoh**. However, when connected to יהוה’s **census** of the **Israelites** in **Bemidbar**, this **expression** communicates a **choice**. יהוה is **hinting** through **Moshe** that **two possible destinies** lie before the **Israelites**. They may **either rise to greatness, or be destroyed**. They will either be **successful in their conquest and possession of the land**, or (if they fail to obey יהוה) **they too will face destruction**.

When יהוה “**lifts the head**” of His **chosen people**, it is an **acknowledgment** of the **special relationship** that He has with them. Because of this relationship, **Israel** has the **potential** of **receiving all of the blessings** described in the Scriptures. But with this **election**, comes **expectation**. The “**heads of the people will be lifted**,” but **their attitudes and actions** will be held to a **higher standard**. Unlike the **butler** and the **baker** **each person** has a **say** in his **own destiny**. The “**lifting of the head**” is still a **powerful model** for us today. As we **bond together as Israel**, **each person** should feel **valued and recognized**. It should be an **uplifting experience** that draws us **closer** to the **Father** and to the **Torah**.

The **Levites** were **excluded** from the **general census**, **not because** they did **not participate in wars**, but **because their function** and importance as the **closest servants** of יהוה obliged that they be **counted separately**. The **instructions** for their **counting** were also **different**:

Bemidbar 3:15 "Number the children of Levi by their fathers' houses, by their families; you shall number every male from a month old and above."

In the **general census**, **males 20 years** and up were **counted**. Why were **Levites counted** beginning at such a **young age**? **Rabbi Hirsch** (1800’s) offers an **explanation**:

“This **counting the Levites** from earliest infancy, **after living for 30 days** can be taken to prove that the **calling of caring** for the **Sanctuary** during the encampments and wandering can only be the result of, and a **concrete expression** of, their **general calling**. So that, counting them from childhood must have some **calling in view beyond this service**.....it must be a **calling** for which perhaps they are **fit for** at an **early age**, but which, in any case, must **demand the whole of the bringing up and education of youths from earliest childhood onwards**. And in fact, the tribe of **Levi** was **not to be merely the guardians and watchers** over the **Tabernacle**, but were to be the **defenders and protectors, teachers** and advocates of the **Torah** itself and its **observance**.... This **general calling** of the **Levite** belongs to the **Levite child from the first month**, and he must be **brought up for it** from the **beginning** of his **growth**.”

The **preparation for spiritual leadership** was a **life-long process of education**. It required **direction and training beginning with parental instruction in the home**. Not only were the **Levites counted separately**, but their **tribe also lived separately** from the other tribes. The **Levites were servants**. Their **work was on behalf of the entire community** as they **served Aharon, the High Priest**:

*Bemidbar 3:5 And **יהוה** spoke to Moshe, saying:⁶ "Bring the **tribe of Levi** near, and **present them before Aharon the priest, that they may serve him.** ⁷ "And they shall attend to his needs and the needs of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of meeting, to do the work of the tabernacle. ⁸ "Also they shall attend to all the furnishings of the tabernacle of meeting, and to the needs of the children of Israel, to do the work of the tabernacle.*

The **priesthood represented the whole community**. The **entire nation, however, was responsible for Torah**. All the nation had come together to **build the Tabernacle** so that the **Shekhinah glory** would come down and dwell among them.

If we **continue reading**, we will see **another role** of the **Levites**:

*Bemidbar 3:11 Then **יהוה** spoke to Moshe, saying:¹² "Now behold, **I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel** instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the **Levites shall be Mine,**¹³ "because all the firstborn are Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. **They shall be Mine: I am יהוה.**"*

So the **Levites are not looked at as just representatives of the people**. Here **יהוה** describes them as **HIS property**. He sets them apart to serve Him and to represent Him. The Levites, therefore, seem to fill a **dual role**. On one hand, **they represent the people**, yet on the other hand, **they represent the Almighty**. This explains the **location of the Levite camp, between the Tabernacle and the people of Israel**. They are a **bridge between the nation and יהוה**. The Levites represent the **people before יהוה** as they perform their **various duties** in the **Tabernacle**, and they represent **יהוה before the people** as they were the **teachers of Torah**:

Devarim 33:10 They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, And Israel Your Torah...

Does this have any **application to us today**? Absolutely! We also **serve a High Priest**...according to the order of **Melchizedek (King of Righteousness)**. It is a **heavenly order** and is not the same as this **earthly Levitical priesthood**. **HOWEVER**...we can still learn from the **dual roles of the Levites**. We still have an obligation to **SERVE Israel** as we **lift them up** to the **Holy One of Israel**; and we still can be the **teachers of Torah** to **all of Israel** as we are **HIS property** and therefore **representing Him**. Is this not the **Great Commission**?

*Matthew 28:19 "Go therefore and **make disciples (serve them)** of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ "**teaching them (represent יהוה)** to observe all things that I have commanded you...*

Now “just one more thing” concerning the **placement** of the **tribes** as they were **organized around the Tabernacle**. The **Presence of יהוה**, as **represented by the Tabernacle**, stood at the **center** of the **community of Israelites**. Its **intention** was to be the **focal point** of **Israelite life** – both **physically** and **spiritually**. Let’s take a look at **who camps on the east side**:

Bemidbar 2:3 "On the east side, toward the rising of the sun, those of the standard of the forces with Judah shall camp according to their armies...⁵ "Those who camp next to him shall be the tribe of Issachar...." ⁷ "Then comes the tribe of Zebulun... 3:38 Moreover those who were to camp before the tabernacle on the east, before the tabernacle of meeting, were Moshe, Aharon, and his sons, keeping charge of the sanctuary, to meet the needs of the children of Israel..."

Near to the **Tabernacle on the east side**, we have the families of **Moshe and Aharon**; and **out from them**, the **tribes of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun**. Because **Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun** were the **neighbors of Moshe and Aharon** who **occupied themselves with Torah**, they were no doubt **influenced by their way of life**.

In **Devarim**, **Moshe** gives a **final blessing** to **each of the tribes**. The following is the **blessing for Judah**. As the **tribe of the Messiah**, the **blessing** sounds **very Messianic** as **Moshe** asks that **Judah** be “**brought to his people**”:

Devarim 33:7 And this he said of Judah: "Hear, יהודה, the voice of Judah, And bring him to his people; Let his hands be sufficient for him, And may You be a help against his enemies."

Next are the **blessings for Zebulun and Issachar**:

Devarim 33:18 And of Zebulun he said: "Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going out, And Issachar in your tents! ¹⁹ They shall call the peoples to the mountain; There they shall offer sacrifices of righteousness; For they shall suck of the abundance of the seas (yam - יָם) And of treasures hidden in the sand."

- “in your tents” – idiom for studying Torah
- “call the peoples to the mountain” – Mount Zion?
 - *Isaiah 2:2 Now it shall come to pass in the latter days That the mountain of יהודה's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, And shall be exalted above the hills; And all nations shall flow to it. ³ Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of יהודה, To the house of the Elohim of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, And we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah, And the word of יהודה from Jerusalem*
- “sacrifices of righteousness”
 - *1 Peter 2:5 you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to Yah through Messiah Yeshua.*
- “suck of the abundance of the seas (yam - יָם)”

- “suck” as in “nurse” or “drink milk”. Yam (יָם), translated here as “sea”, is also the word for “west”. The ways of Torah are the ways of the “east”. Have these tribe members drunk the milk from the “sea/west”, on their way to “finding the treasures”?
- “treasures hidden in the sand” – Israel is compared to the sand in our Haftarah in Hosea this week. Have the tribes of Zebulun and Issachar stumbled onto the treasures of who is Israel?
 - *Hosea 2:1 (1:10) " Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, Which cannot be measured or numbered. And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not My people,' There it shall be said to them, 'You are sons of the living Elohim.'*

The Presence of the Almighty was placed in the center of camp in order to be its focus. However, He also arranged the camp in such a way as to be able to learn from your neighbor. We too can look about and learn from the models of wisdom and goodness around us. It becomes a sacred awareness and an appreciation for where our Creator has physically placed us in this life. Have you noticed how a grapevine grows? As branches, we all must be connected to the vine, who is Yeshua, but are you aware of what a grapevine looks like as it becomes fruitful?



Notice how the branches are completely entangled. There’s no way you could ever separate the branches one from another without severing them from the vine. We gain life from the vine, but we also can hold one another up as we bear fruit.

Now notice the organization of a vineyard on the Mount of Blessing in Israel. As I looked at this beautiful vineyard, I couldn’t help but be reminded of the tribes situated around the Tabernacle.



And then I found this in the **Psalms**:

Psalm 80:8 You have brought a vine out of Egypt; You have cast out the nations, and planted it.⁹ You prepared room for it, And caused it to take deep root, And it filled the land.¹⁰ The hills were covered with its shadow, And the mighty cedars with its boughs.¹¹ She sent out her boughs to the Sea (yam - יָם), And her branches to the River...¹⁴ Return, we beseech You, O Elohim of hosts; Look down from heaven and see, And visit this vine¹⁵ And the vineyard which Your right hand has planted, And the branch that You made strong for Yourself.

Shabbat Shalom!

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