

The Parshah in a Nutshell

# Bamidbar

**Bamidbar 1:1-4:20**

In the Sinai **Desert**, G-d says to conduct a census of the twelve tribes of Israel. Moses counts **603,550** men of draftable age (20 to 60 years); the tribe of Levi, numbering 22,300 males age one month and older, is counted separately. The **Levites** are to serve in the Sanctuary, replacing the **firstborn**, whose number they approximated, who were disqualified when they participated in the worshipping of the Golden Calf. The 273 firstborn who lacked a Levite to replace them had to pay a five-shekel "ransom" to **redeem** themselves.

When the people broke camp, the three Levite clans dismantled and **transported** the Sanctuary, and reassembled it at the center of the next encampment. They then erected their own tents around it: the Kehatites, who carried the Sanctuary's vessels (the ark, menorah, etc.) in their specially designed **coverings** on their shoulders, camped to its south; the Gershonites, in charge of its tapestries and roof coverings, to its west; and the families of Merrari, who transported its wall panels and pillars, to its north. Before the Sanctuary's **entranceway** to its east were the tents of Moses, Aaron and Aaron's sons.

Beyond the Levite circle, the **twelve tribes** camped in four groups of three tribes each. To the east were Judah (pop. 74,600), Issachar (54,400) and Zebulun (57,400); to the south, Reuben (46,500), Simeon (59,300) and Gad (45,650); to the west, Ephraim (40,500), Menasseh (32,200) and Benjamin (35,400); and to the north, Dan (62,700), Asher (41,500) and Naphtali (53,400). This formation was kept also while **traveling**. Each tribe had its own *nassi* (prince or leader), and its own **flag** with its tribal color and emblem.



ICI Sarah Kranz

## Bamidbar

Bamidbar 1: 1- 4:20

In the desert  
("bamidbar") of  
Sinai, on the 1st of

the month of Iyar, one year and two weeks after the Exodus from Egypt, G-d speaks to Moses. The leader of Israel is instructed to conduct a census of his people:

**Raise the head** of all the congregation of the children of Israel, after their families, by the houses of their fathers, by the number of names, every male by their polls.

From **twenty** years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel: you and Aaron shall number them by their hosts.

Assisting Moses and Aaron are the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. The people assemble and "declare their pedigrees after their families, after the house of their fathers." The results of the census are:

The tribe of Reuben--46,500; Simeon--59,300; Gad--45,650; Judah--74,600; Issachar--54,400; Zebulun--57,400; Ephraim--40,500; Menasseh--32,200; Benjamin--35,400; Dan--62,700; Asher--41,500; Naphtali--53,400.

And all those that were numbered of the children of Israel... Six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty.

## Commentary

**bamidbar:** It is customary that on the Shabbat before a wedding, the bridegroom is called to the Torah. Shavuot, the festival which coincides with the anniversary of the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, represents the marriage of G-d and Israel; this is why the Torah portion of *Bamidbar* ("in the desert") is usually read on the Shabbat before Shavuot. (Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch)

**Raise the head:** Raise the head of all the congregation of the children of Israel... by the number of names (1:2)

On ten occasions were Israel counted. Once when they went down to Egypt (cf. Genesis 46). A second time when they came out (Exodus 12:37). A third time after the incident of the Golden Calf (ibid., 30:12). Twice in the Book of Numbers: once in formation of the camps (Numbers 1) and once in connection with the division of the land (ibid. 26). Twice in the days of Saul (I Samuel 11:8 and 15:4). The eighth time in the days of David (II Samuel 24:9). The ninth time they were numbered was in the days of Ezra (Ezra 2:64; Nehemiah 7:66). The tenth time will be in the future era of Moshiach, when "The flocks shall again pass under the hands of Him that counts them" (Jeremiah 33:13). (Midrash Rabbah)

Because of G-d's great love for His people, He counts them all the time. He counted them when they left Egypt. He counted them after they fell in the wake of the sin of the Golden Calf, to know the number of the survivors. And He counted them when He came to manifest His presence within them: on the first of Nissan the Sanctuary was erected, and [one month later] on the first of Iyar He counted them. (Rashi)

This is reflected in the Hebrew word for "count", *pakod*, which also means "remember" and "be concerned with." (Nachmanides)

A census expresses two paradoxical truths. On the one hand, it implies that each individual is significant. On the other hand, a head-count is the ultimate equalizer: each member of the community, from the greatest to the lowliest, counts for no less and no more than "one." G-d repeatedly commands to count the Jewish people to emphasize both their individual worth--the fact that no single person's contribution is dispensable--as well as their inherent equality. (HThe Chassidic MastersH)

## The Levites

## Commentary

**twenty:** From the age of twenty and upward, all who are fit to serve in the army of Israel, you shall count them (1:3)

Moses' census of the Jewish people, defined as a count of "all who are fit to serve in the army of Israel," included only those who were "from the age of twenty and upwards." What is the significance of this requirement?

The fifth chapter of *Ethics of the Fathers* includes an outline of the phases of a person's education and life: "At five years of age, the study of Scripture; at ten, the study of *mishnah*; at thirteen, the obligation to observe the mitzvot; at fifteen, the study of Talmud; at eighteen, marriage; at twenty, begins the pursuit [of a livelihood]; at thirty, one attains strength; at forty, understanding; at fifty, one can give counsel..."

In other words, the first twenty years of a person's life represent those periods and areas of his life in which he focuses almost exclusively on his individual growth: the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom and his moral and spiritual development. "Twenty" represents the point at which he ventures out to the world and begins to concern himself with the material involvements of life.

Therein lies the deeper significance of G-d's instruction to Moses that only "from the age of twenty and upwards" shall a person be counted as one "fit to serve in the army of Israel."

A period of intense self-development and spiritual self-enrichment is a necessary preparation to life, but it must not be seen as an end in itself. The purpose of the "pre-twenty" times and aspects of a person's life is for the sake of the "pursuit" which must follow: that he or she go out into the world and apply his personal attainments to the development and sanctification of the material reality. One who does not graduate to the "post-twenty" phase of life, cannot count himself as a member of the "army of Israel."

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

The tribe of Levi, however, was not included in this count; for they are to be "**set aside**," consecrated to serve in the Sanctuary. As G-d instructs Moses:

*Only you shall not number the tribe of Levi, nor take the sum of them among the children of Israel.*

*Appoint the Levites over the Tabernacle of Testimony, and over all its vessels, and over all things that belong to it. They shall carry the Tabernacle and all its vessels, they shall minister to it, and round about the Tabernacle shall they camp.*

*And when the Tabernacle journeys forward, the Levites shall take it down: and when the Tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up.*

### The Camp

"Every man by his flag, shall the children of Israel camp." Each of the **twelve tribes** had its *nassi* ("prince"), a flag

## Commentary

**set aside:** *Behold, I have take the Levites from amongst the children of Israel... and the Levites shall be Mine (3:12)*

Not only the tribe of Levi, but any man of all the inhabitants of the earth, whose spirit has moved him and whose mind has given him to understand to set himself aside to stand before G-d to serve Him, to worship Him, to know G-d and walk justly as G-d has created him [justly], and he cast from his neck the yoke of the many calculations that men seek--this man has become sanctified, a holy of holies, and G-d shall be his portion and his lot forever, and shall merit him his needs in this world, as He has merited the *Kohanim* and the Levites. (Maimonides)

**twelve tribes:** *Every man by his flag, shall the children of Israel camp, by the ensigns of their father's house (2:2)*

What is the meaning of "by the ensigns of their father's house"?

When G-d told Moses to organize the Israelite camp Moses began to feel distressed. He thought, "now strife will arise among the tribes; for if I bid the tribe of Judah camp on the east side of the Tabernacle and he says, 'I will accept only the south,' and the same applies to Reuben and the same to Ephraim and to each of the other tribes, what am I to do?"

Said G-d to him: "Moses, why should that trouble you? They have no need of you. They know their places full well themselves. They are in possession of a testament left them by Jacob their father, which tells them how to camp under their standards. I am not going to make any changes. They already have a traditional order from Jacob their father: in the same way that they disposed themselves round his bier when they carried him, so shall they dispose themselves round the Tabernacle."

representing its **color and emblem**, and its own section in the Israelite camp.

## Commentary

For Rav Chama, son of Rabbi Chaninah, said: When our father Jacob was about to depart from the world he summoned his sons and he blessed them and commanded them concerning the ways of G-d, and they acknowledged the Divine sovereignty. Having concluded his address, he said to them: "My children, when my bier is being carried, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun shall be on the east side; Reuben, Simeon, and Gad shall be on the south side; Ephraim, Menasseh, and Benjamin shall be on the west side; Dan, Asher, and Naphtali shall be on the north side; Joseph shall not carry at all, for he is a king and must be shown due honor; neither shall Levi carry because he will carry the Ark, and he that is to carry the Ark of Him who is the life of all worlds must not carry the coffin of the dead. If you will comply with these orders and carry my bier as I have commanded you, G-d will in the future cause you to camp beneath standards." (Midrash Rabbah)

**color and emblem:** *Every man by his flag, shall the children of Israel camp (2:2)*

Each tribe had its own prince and its flag whose color corresponded to the color of its stone [in Aaron's breastplate--see Exodus 28:15-21]. It was from the tribes of Israel that kingdoms learned to provide themselves with flags of various colors.

Reuben's stone was a ruby; the color of his flag was red and embroidered thereon were mandrakes [cf. Genesis 30:14].

Simeon's stone was a topaz; his flag was of a green color, and the town of Shechem was embroidered thereon [cf. Genesis 34:25].

Levi's stone was a smaragd; the color of his flag was one third white, one third black, and one third red, and embroidered thereon was [Aaron's breastplate with] the *Urim* and *Tummim*.

Judah's stone was a carbuncle; the color of his flag was like the color of the heavens and embroidered on it was a lion [cf. Genesis 49:9].

Issachar's stone was a sapphire; the color of his flag was black like stibium, and embroidered thereon was the sun and moon, in allusion to the verse, "And of the children of Issachar, men that had understanding of the times" (I Chronicles 12:33).

Zebulun's stone was an emerald; the color of his flag was white, with a ship embroidered thereon, in allusion to the verse, "Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea" (Gen. 49:13).

Dan's stone was a jacinth; the color of his flag was similar to sapphire, and embroidered on it was a serpent, in allusion to the verse, "Dan shall be a serpent in the way" (ibid. v. 17).

Gad's stone was an agate; the color of his flag was neither white nor black but a blend of black and white, and on it was embroidered a military camp, in allusion to the verse, "Gad, a troop shall troop upon him" (ibid. v. 19).

The Sanctuary stood in the center of the camp, surrounded by the tents of the Levites. Beyond the Levite camp were the camps of the twelve tribes. To the east were the tribes of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun, together comprising the greater "Camp of Judah." To the south was the "Camp of Reuben", encompassing the camps of Reuben, Simeon and Gad. To the west, Ephraim, Menasseh and Benjamin made up the "Camp of Ephraim." To the north was the "Camp of Dan" with Dan, Asher and Naphtali.

This formation was preserved as the people journeyed through the desert, with the Camp of Judah at the head of the procession and the Camp of Dan bringing up the rear.

Again the Torah lists the adult male population for each tribe, also tallying the total for each camp: 186,400 for the Camp of Judah, 151,450 for the Camp of Reuben, 108,100 in the Camp of Ephraim, and 157,600 for the three tribes comprising the Camp of Dan. Total: 603,550.

"And the **Levites** were not counted together with the Children of Israel, as G-d had commanded to Moses."

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## Commentary

Naphtali's stone was an amethyst; the color of his flag was like clarified wine of a light red, and on it was embroidered a deer, in allusion to the verse, "Naphtali is a deer let loose" (ibid. v. 21).

Asher's stone was a beryl; the color of his flag was like the precious stone with which women adorn themselves, and embroidered thereon was an olive-tree, in allusion to the verse, "As for Asher, his bread shall be fat with oil" (ibid. v. 20).

Joseph's stone was an onyx and the color of his flags were jet black; the embroidered design thereon for the two tribes descendant from Joseph, Ephraim and Menasseh, was Egypt, because they were born in Egypt. On the flag of Ephraim was embroidered a bullock, in allusion to the verse, "His firstling bullock" (Deuteronomy 33:17), which refers to Joshua who came from the tribe of Ephraim. On the flag of the tribe of Menasseh was embroidered a unicorn, in allusion to the verse, "And his horns are the horns of the *re'em*" (ibid.), which alludes to Gideon son of Joash who came from the tribe of Menasseh.

Benjamin's stone was jasper and the color of his flag was a combination of all the twelve colors; embroidered thereon was a wolf, in allusion to the verse, "Benjamin is a wolf that raveneth" (Genesis 49:27). (Midrash Rabbah)

**Levites:** *All that were numbered of the Levites... were twenty two thousand (3:39)*

The tribe of Levi was different from all the others: even counting all members from the age of one month, there were only 22,000; when those thirty years or older were counted, they totaled 8,000 (see Numbers 4:48). Hence, if we were to estimate their members from age twenty, they would not be half the number of the least populous of the other tribes!

## The Levite Census

Originally, the service in the Sanctuary was to have been performed by the firstborn, since "on the day that I smote all firstborn in Egypt, I have consecrated to Me all firstborn in Israel." But this privilege was taken from them when the firstborn joined in the making of the Golden Calf, and only the tribe of Levi remained loyal to G-d (cf. Exodus 32:26).

G-d now commands Moses to count the Levites, in order to appoint them to their specific tasks in the service of the Sanctuary. It was also necessary to know their exact number so that a transfer of the "consecration" could be made from each of the firstborn to the individual Levite who would replace him. Unlike the other tribes, the census of the Levites included children as well, beginning from the age of one month.

First to be enumerated is **Aaron's family**, who constituted a distinct class within the Levite tribe: they were the Kohanim ("priests"), who conducted the service in the Sanctuary.

*These are the generations of Aaron and Moses in the day that G-d spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. And these are the names of the sons of Aaron: the firstborn Nadav, Avihu, Elazar and Itamar...*

*And Nadav and Avihu died before G-d, when they offered strange fire before G-d, in the wilderness of Sinai, and they had no children; and Elazar and*

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## Commentary

It seems to me that this verifies that which our sages said, that the tribe of Levi was not subjected to slave labor in Egypt. G-d greatly increased the numbers of the Israelites whose lives were made bitter by the Egyptians with hard labor in order to decimate them, in order to counteract the Egyptians' decrees, as it is written (Exodus 1:12): "And as they afflicted them, so did they increase, and so did they grow strong." The tribe of Levi, however, increased only at the natural rate... (Nachmanides)

**Aaron's family:** *And these are the generations of Aaron and Moses... Nadav, Avihu, Elazar and Itamar (3:1-2)*

Why did Moses' sons not merit [to be in the leadership of Israel]? Because they did not experience the Exodus from Egypt and did not traverse the sea with the people of Israel, as they were [in Midian] with Jethro (Moses' father-in-law--see Exodus 18:1-6).

(Midrash HaChafetz)

*And these are the generations of Aaron and Moses (3:1-2)*

Usually Moses appears before Aaron, but in certain places Aaron is mentioned first. This is to teach us that they were **HbothH** of equal importance. (Midrash)

*Itamar ministered in the priest's office in the sight of Aaron their father.*

The rest of the tribe of Levi served as assistants to the Kohanim and caretakers of the Sanctuary, and were divided into three clans, descendants of Levi's three sons: Gershon, Kehat and Merrari.

The Gershonites numbered 7,500 and camped on the west side of the Sanctuary. When the Sanctuary was transported, the families of Gershon were in charge of "the tabernacle roof-covering, and the tent roof-covering, the upper roof-covering, the screen for the door of the Tent of Meeting, the hangings of the court, the screen for the door of the court... and the cords of it for all its service."

The families of Kehat, numbering 8,600 and pitching their tents to the Sanctuary's south, carried the Sanctuary's "vessels": "The ark, the table, the menorah, the altars and the holy vessels with which the service is performed; and the [inner] screen and all its implements."

The Merrari families totaled 6,200 and camped to the Sanctuary's north. "And under the custody and charge of the sons of Merrari shall be the wall-panels of the Tabernacle, its bars, its pillars, its foundation sockets, and all their implements and all that belongs to them. And the pillars of the court round about, and their sockets, pegs and cords."

*And camping before the Tabernacle toward the east, before the Tent of Meeting eastward, shall be Moses and Aaron and his sons, keeping the charge of the sanctuary for the charge of the children of Israel.*

G-d now commands Moses to count all male firstborn in Israel from the age of one month and older and "take the Levite to Me--I am G-d--in the place of all the firstborn of Israel." There were 22,273 firstborn, but **only 22,000 Levites** to replace them. The remaining 273 each

## Commentary

**only 22,000 Levites:** *For the redemption of those 273 of the firstborn of the children of Israel who are more than the Levites, you shall take five shekels for every man (3:46-47)*

In fact, there were 22,300 Levites: 7,500 Gershonites, 8,600 Kehatites and 6,200 Merrarites -- total 22,300. So why were these not included with the rest in the redemption of the firstborn, so that the extra 273 should not require redemption? Our sages explained that these 300 were themselves firstborn, and had to "redeem" themselves. (Rashi; Talmud)

Said Moses: How shall I act toward Israel? If I say to a man, "Give me [the shekels for] your redemption," he will say: "A Levite has already redeemed me."

What did Moses do? He brought twenty-two thousand slips and wrote on each, "Levite", and on another two hundred and seventy-three he wrote, "five shekels." Then he mixed them up, put them

contributed a sum of five shekels to Aaron and his sons as a "ransom". (All subsequently first-born Israelite male are likewise redeemed).

## Covering the Vessels

When the Levites transported the Sanctuary, the most prestigious task fell to the Kehatites: on their shoulders, they carried the Sanctuary's holy vessels. But first the vessels had to be covered by the priests with special wool and leather covering made for this purpose.

*And when the camp sets forward, Aaron and his sons shall come, and they shall take down the parochet of the screen, and cover the Ark of Testimony with it; over this they shall put a covering of tachash skins, and shall spread over that a cloth wholly of blue wool, and shall put in its [the Ark's] carrying poles. Similar coverings were made for the Table, Menorah and the two Altars, to "**swallow the holy**" and conceal them from non-priestly eyes.*

## Commentary

into an urn and said to the people, "Draw your slips." To each who drew a slip bearing the word "Levite", he said, "A Levite has redeemed you." To each who drew a ticket with "five shekels" on it, he said, "Pay your redemption and go." (Talmud, Sanhedrin 17a)

**swallow the holy:** *And when the camp journeys on, Aaron and his sons shall come and take down the dividing curtain [of the Sanctuary] and cover the Ark of Testimony with it. They shall place upon it a covering of tachash hide, and spread over it a garment wholly of blue-wool (4:5-6)*

Like the Ark, the soul of man is encased within three coverings: 1) it is overlaid with a selfish and materialistic character (what Chassidism calls "the animal soul"); 2) it is imbedded within a physical body; 3) it is placed in a physical world which obscures and distorts the Divine reality. As long as the ark stood in its place in the Holy of Holies, it had no need for coverings. But when the time came for it to journey on, G-d commanded that it be "swallowed up" by its three-fold vestment. The same applies to the soul. A "spark of G-dliness," the soul is perfect and complete unto itself. But to journey on--to advance further in the infinite journey toward union with its Infinite Source--it must undergo on a "descent for the sake of ascent." It must be subjected to the three-fold concealment of human nature, physicality and worldliness, to discover, in the lowliest reaches of creation, the key for even greater connection with G-d.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

## The 603,550th Jew

*Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson*

In Hebrew, it's called *Bamidbar* ("In the Desert") and also *Sefer HaPekudim* ("The Book of the Countings"); in the English-speaking world, this is the biblical section known as "Numbers". And yes, there are many, many numbers in the fourth of the Torah's five books.

In its opening chapters we learn that one year after the Exodus, there were 603,550 adult Israelite males between the ages of 20 and 60, of whom 22,273 were firstborn; a separate census counted 22,300 Levites age one month and older (7,500 Gershonites, 8,600 Kehattites, and 6,200 in the Merrari clan). We are also given the figure for each of the twelve tribes, from the Judah's 74,600 to Menasseh's 32,200. Then the Torah tallies the number in each of the four "camps" into which the twelve tribes were divided: Judah's camp, which also included the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun, totaled 186,400; the three tribes in Reuben's camp totaled 151,450; Ephraim's camp included 108,100, and 157,600 pitched their tents in the Camp of Dan.

Twenty six chapters and 39 years later we're still in the Book of Numbers and in the midst of another census. Again, we get the total figure (now 601,730) and the numbers for each tribe. We notice that Simeon has been tragically decimated (22,200, down from 59,300) while Menasseh's ranks have swelled to 52,700 (a gain of 20,500). But most of all we notice how G-d's passion for counting His people has not waned.

For, as G-d says to Moses, we're not just counting people. We're "raising their heads."

When a census is taken, the count will include scholars and boors, professionals and vagabonds, philanthropists and misers, saints and criminals. Yet each counts for no more and no less than "1" in the total number. The count reflects only the one quality they all share equally: the fact that each is an individual human being.

So is a headcount an expression of the lowest common denominator in a collection of individuals? The answer

depends on how one views the essence of humanity. If man is basically neutral or worse--if we all begin with zero and make of ourselves what we are -- than what unites us as individuals is indeed the least of our qualities. G-d, however, has a different perspective on the "huddled masses" of man.

As G-d sees it, the soul of man is a spark of His own fire -- a spark with the potential to reflect the infinite goodness and perfection of its source. Human life is the endeavor to realize what is implicit in this spark. Indeed, a person may lead a full, accomplished and righteous life, and barely scratch the surface of the infinitude of his or her soul. Another person may blunder for a lifetime in darkness and iniquity, and then, in a moment of self-discovery, fan their Divine spark into roaring flame.

So when G-d instructs that we be counted, it is an expression of our *highest* common denominator. On the Divine census sheet, our differences are transcended to reveal the simple fact of our being -- a fact which expresses what is best in us, and from which stems all that is good in us.

G-d counts us not to know our number (which He obviously knows), or even to get in touch with the quintessence of our souls (which He obviously is). He counts us to accentuate our soul of souls, to give expression to its essence and to make it more accessible to our material-bound lives.

Therein lies the deeper significance of the idiom "raise the heads" in G-d's instruction to Moses to count the people of Israel. When G-d counts us, He is stimulating the highest and loftiest part of our being, the spark of Divinity which lies at the core of our soul.

*Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe; adapted by Yanki Tauber*