

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Bamidbar
May 20, 2023 *** 29 Iyar, 5783

Bamidbar in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2121/jewish/Bamidbar-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Bamidbar," means "In the desert" and it is found in Numbers 1:1.

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. They replace the firstborn, whose number they approximated, since they 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 Kohathites, 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 Merari, 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), Manasseh (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.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Hosea 2:1-22.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/895213/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's *haftarah* begins with the words, "The number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea [shore], which can be neither measured nor counted." An appropriate reading for the first Torah reading of the Book of *Numbers*.

Hosea first prophesies about the eventual reunification of the houses of Judah and Israel. During the Messianic Era, these two perennial antagonists

will make peace and appoint a single leader. Hosea then rebukes the Jewish people for their infidelity, abandoning their "husband," G-d, and engaging in adulterous affairs with pagan deities. He describes the punishments they will suffer because of this unfaithfulness.

Eventually, though, Hosea reassures the Jews that they will repent, and G-d will accept them back wholeheartedly. The *haftorah* concludes with the moving words: "And I will betroth you to Me forever, and I will betroth you to Me with righteousness and with justice and with loving-kindness and with mercy."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Sound of Silence: Bamidbar by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bamidbar/the-sound-of-silence/>

Bamidbar is usually read on the Shabbat before Shavuot. So the Sages connected the two. Shavuot is the time of the giving of the Torah. Bamidbar means, "in the desert". What then is the connection between the desert and the Torah, the wilderness and God's word?

The Sages gave several interpretations. According to the Mechilta, the Torah was given publicly, openly, and in a place no one owns because had it been given in the Land of Israel, Jews would have said to the nations of the world, "You have no share in it." Instead, whoever wants to come and accept it, let them come and accept it.[1]

Another explanation: Had the Torah been given in Israel the nations of the world would have had an excuse for not accepting it. This follows the rabbinic tradition that, before God gave the Torah to the Israelites, He offered it to all the other nations and each found a reason to decline.[2]

Yet another: Just as the wilderness is free – it costs nothing to enter – so the Torah is free. It is God's gift to us.[3]

But there is another, more spiritual reason. The desert is a place of silence. There is nothing visually to distract you, and there is no ambient noise to muffle sound. To be sure, when the Israelites received the Torah, there was thunder and lightning and the sound of a shofar. The earth felt as if it were shaking at its foundations. But in a later age, when the Prophet Elijah stood at the same mountain after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal, he encountered God not in the whirlwind or the fire or the earthquake but in the kol demamah dakah, the still, small voice, literally "the sound of a slender silence" (1 Kings 19:9-12)." I define this as the sound you can only hear if you are listening. In the silence of the midbar, the desert, you can hear the Medaber, the Speaker, and the medubar, that which is spoken. To hear the voice of God you need a listening silence in the soul.

Many years ago British television produced a documentary series, *The Long Search*, on the world's great religions.[4] When it came to Judaism, the presenter Ronald Eyre seemed surprised by its blooming, buzzing confusion, especially the loud, argumentative voices in the *beit midrash*, the house of study. Remarking on this to Elie Wiesel, he asked, "Is there such a thing as a silence in Judaism?" Wiesel replied: "Judaism is full of silences ... but we don't talk about them."

Judaism is a very verbal culture, a religion of holy words. Through words, God created the universe: "And God said, Let there be ... and there was." According to the Targum, it is our ability to speak that makes us human. It translates the phrase, "and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7) as "and man became a speaking soul." Words create. Words communicate. Our relationships are shaped, for good or bad, by language. Much of Judaism is about the power of words to make or break worlds.

So silence in Tanach often has a negative connotation. "Aaron was silent," says the Torah, after the death of his two sons Nadav and Avihu (Lev. 10:3). "The dead do not praise you," says Psalm 115, "nor do those who go down to the silence [of the grave]." When Job's friends came to comfort him after the loss of his children and other afflictions, "they sat down with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, yet no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great." (Job 2:13).

But not all silence is sad. Psalms tells us that "to You, silence is praise" (Ps. 65:2). If we are truly in awe at the greatness of God, the vastness of the universe and the almost infinite extent of time, our deepest emotions will indeed lie too deep for words. We will experience silent communion.

The Sages valued silence. They called it "a fence to wisdom" (Mishna Avot 3:13). If words are worth a coin, silence is worth two (Megilla 18a). R. Shimon ben Gamliel said:

"All my days I have grown up among the wise, and I have found nothing better than silence."

Mishna Avot 1:17

The service of the Priests in the Temple was accompanied by silence. The Levites sang in the courtyard, but the Priests – unlike their counterparts in other ancient religions – neither sang nor spoke while offering the sacrifices. One scholar, Israel Knohl, has accordingly spoken of "the silence of the sanctuary." The Zohar (2a) speaks of silence as the medium in which both the Sanctuary above and the Sanctuary below are made.

There were also Jews who cultivated silence as a spiritual discipline. Bratslav Hassidim meditate in the fields. There are Jews who practise *ta'anit dibbur*, a "fast

of words". Our most profound prayer, the private saying of the Amidah, is called tefillah be-lachash, the "silent prayer". It is based on the precedent of Hannah, praying for a child.

"She spoke in her heart. Her lips moved but her voice was not heard."

1 Sam. 1:13

God hears our silent cry. In the agonising tale of how Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar and her son away, the Torah tells us that when their water ran out and the young Ishmael was at the point of dying, Hagar cried, yet God heard "the voice of the child" (Gen. 21:16-17). Earlier when the angels came to visit Abraham and told him that Sarah would have a child, Sarah laughed inwardly, that is, silently, yet she was heard by God (Gen. 18:12-13). God hears our thoughts even when they are not expressed in speech.

The silence that counts, in Judaism, is thus a listening silence – and listening is the supreme religious art. Listening means making space for others to speak and be heard. As I point out in my commentary to the Siddur,[5] there is no English word that remotely equals the Hebrew verb sh-m-a in its wide range of senses: to listen, to hear, to pay attention, to understand, to internalise and to respond in deed.

This was one of the key elements in the Sinai covenant, when the Israelites, having already said twice, "All that God says, we will do," then said, "All that God says, we will do and we will hear [ve-nishma]" (Ex. 24:7). It is the nishma – listening, hearing, heeding, responding – that is the key religious act.

Thus Judaism is not only a religion of doing-and-speaking; it is also a religion of listening. Faith is the ability to hear the music beneath the noise. There is the silent music of the spheres, about which Psalm 19 speaks:

**"The heavens declare the glory of God
The skies proclaim the work of His hands.
Day to day they pour forth speech,
Night to night they communicate knowledge.
There is no speech, there are no words,
Their voice is not heard.
Yet their music carries throughout the earth."**

Tehillim 19

There is the voice of history that was heard by the prophets. And there is the commanding voice of Sinai that continues to speak to us across the abyss of time. I sometimes think that people in the modern age have found the concept of "Torah from Heaven" problematic, not because of some new archaeological discovery but because we have lost the habit of listening to the sound of transcendence, a voice beyond the merely human.

It is fascinating that despite his often-fractured relationship with Judaism, Sigmund Freud created in psychoanalysis a deeply Jewish form of healing. He himself called it the “speaking cure,” but it is in fact a listening cure. Almost all effective forms of psychotherapy involve deep listening.

Is there enough listening in the Jewish world today? Do we, in marriage, really listen to our spouses? Do we as parents truly listen to our children? Do we, as leaders, hear the unspoken fears of those we seek to lead? Do we internalise the sense of hurt of the people who feel excluded from the community? Can we really claim to be listening to the voice of God if we fail to listen to the voices of our fellow humans?

In his poem, ‘In memory of W B Yeats,’ W H Auden wrote:

In the deserts of the heart

Let the healing fountain start.

From time to time we need to step back from the noise and hubbub of the social world and create in our hearts the stillness of the desert where, within the silence, we can hear the kol demamah dakah, the still, small voice of God, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by God’s everlasting arms, we are not alone.[6] [1] Mechilta, Yitro, Bachodesh, 1. [2] Ibid., 5. [3] Ibid. [4] BBC television, first shown 1977. [5] Koren Shalem Siddur. [6] For more on the theme of listening, see parshat Bereishit, “The Art of Listening,” and parshat Eikev, “The Spirituality of Listening.”

[Reliving Revelation by Gordon Tucker](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/reliving-revelation/)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/reliving-revelation/>

The fourth book of the Torah (“Bemidbar Sinai”) begins with a census of the (male) heads of clans among the Israelites in the second year of their freedom. And then, it lays out the pattern according to which the 12 tribes and the religious functionaries (levi’im and kohanim) are to set up camp in the wilderness. When you read it, you are struck by the attention to detail and good order, something which is rather typical in documents with a priestly source.

There is an aspect to that template for establishing camp that can escape attention but has fascinated me for some time. Imagine that you were able to take an aerial photo of the Israelite camp at one of its wilderness stations. What would you see? According to our text, you would see a holy site at the center (the Mishkan), so sacred that it is off limits to all but a select few. And emanating from the altar at that center is a column of smoke that never goes out (as Leviticus 6:6 requires). Surrounding that holy precinct are Moses and Aaron, and the remainders of the clans of the religious leaders of the people. And finally, in an outer concentric circle, you would see the various tribes of the Israelites, constituting the goy kadosh, the holy people of which Exodus 19:6 spoke.

What is noteworthy about that “skycam” photo? It is just what an aerial shot of the

day of revelation at Mount Sinai would have looked like(!): the holy people surrounding the mountain; an inner ring with the kohanim; Moses, Aaron and a few others of their clan even further in; and finally, an all-but-untouchable mountain peak at the center, exuding smoke like the “smoke of a kiln.” The Israelite camp was constructed to be a replica of Mount Sinai on the day of revelation.

In other words, the apparently dry instructions at the beginning of Bemidbar are actually a prescription for a most important religious practice. It is captured in the imperative “Zakhor,” which Abraham Joshua Heschel understood not as a mere intellectual activity of recall, but as the practice of putting oneself back into a foundational spiritual experience. It is to be at Sinai, in addition to simply remembering the story of what happened there. And extending that, we can say that bringing all of the spiritual moments in our lives with us on our journeys is a crucial prescription that we are given in this fourth book of the Pentateuch. Since it is also the final Shabbat before the celebration and reenactment (through late night study) of the revelation on Shavuot, the lesson it brings with it should particularly command our attention. *(Gordon Tucker is Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement at JTS)*

[Bamidbar: Finding God in the Wilderness by Cantor Shoshana Brown](https://truah.org/resources/shoshana-brown-bamidbar-moraltorah2023/)

<https://truah.org/resources/shoshana-brown-bamidbar-moraltorah2023/>

There is a picture over my desk: a Baltimore oriole, brilliantly orange with a dark black hood and attractively white-striped wings, perched on the bough of a tree. The background is a blur of golden-green, and above the oriole the words of Henry David Thoreau are inscribed: “In wildness is the preservation of the world.” Parshat Bamidbar opens the Book of Numbers with a reminder to its readers: This whole people-forming experience — the deliverance from Egypt, the giving and acceptance of the Covenant at Sinai, the formative years of learning how to live in accordance with God’s many laws — is all taking place in a wilderness. The portion’s first verse also reminds us that within this wilderness, the Israelite people, in accordance with God’s instructions, have fashioned a tent-sanctuary (the ohel moed or mishkan), which was to function as a particular meeting-place between Moses and God, between Aaron and his priestly descendants and God, and, through this mediation, between the people and God:

Thus THE ETERNAL spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting... (Numbers 1:1)

Moses is given instructions to take a census of the male Israelites, according to their tribes and clans. From this numbering of the people comes the English title of the book, “Numbers.”

Now numbering, taking a detailed account of people or of objects, seems to me to

be a quintessentially human activity, something related to our tendency to try to quantify and manipulate the world — more related to civilization or technology than to wildness. As an environmentally-concerned reader, I would love for God to speak to Moses here and tell him to impart to the people lessons about the wonder of the natural world, about how they should be careful not to spoil it, to walk through this wilderness with a light footprint. Instead, Moses gets instructions on enrolling men from the age of 20 and up for possible conscription in an Israelite army.

If “wildness” is a factor in the preservation of the world (and certainly today, with so much ecological devastation impinging upon us, we know that it is), why does this narrative of the formation of the Jewish people not make more of it? In so much of the Torah, the wilderness is there: in the occupation of our nomadic shepherd patriarchs and matriarchs, who rarely lived in fixed houses; in the mystical dream-encounter of Jacob, who first realized God’s presence in a lonely place in the desert where he slept with a rock for his pillow; in the story of Moses encountering the God of “I-will-be-what-I-will-be” while out alone in the backcountry searching for a lost sheep. Further, the Psalms out of which we have formed so much of our liturgy emphasize the natural connection of the individual to God through nature (for instance: “Your works, ETERNAL, make me glad; I sing with joy of Your creation” –Psalm 92, the “Song of Shabbat”).

And yet when God speaks about the way the people as an entity are to live, God seems to emphasize the things that are needed when people come together. Much as we all hate war, we know that in the course of human history the need of nations to be ready to defend themselves against aggressor-nations cannot be ignored. And there is much in the Torah’s legislation that is oriented toward respecting the earth when it comes to agricultural practices — agriculture being the domain of settled people, almost the direct opposite of wildness.

Enter shmita, the sabbatical year, first introduced in Exodus 23:10-11 and then expounded at length — not coincidentally, I believe — in last week’s double parshah, right before the shift into the book of Bamidbar, “in the wilderness.” God emphasizes the importance of granting the land its Sabbaths, during which whatever grows should be left for the poor and even for wild beasts that wander into a field or an orchard. This is a kind of “wildness” for the settled land. Every seven years, we make the settled land temporarily “wild” again, an injunction we read just as we are about to set out from Mt. Sinai into 40 years of wilderness travel on our way to the settled land of Canaan.

That the Torah addresses the concerns that civilization inevitably brings, along with awareness of the need for individuals to experience God in wilderness, seems to me a profound grappling with the needs both of human beings and of

God's non-human world. The environmental justice movement today helps us make the connection between degradation of the Earth and the degradation of people. Learning from the balance that the Torah strikes between these areas of concern, I would say that the world is preserved not in wildness per se, but in the awareness of how all these areas of concern are inextricably interwoven with one another within God's tapestry of Creation. *(Shoshana Brown is the cantor and co-spiritual leader of Temple Beth El in Fall River, MA.)*

[Who Are Our Descendants: Those Whom We Teach: Bamidbar by Rabbi Diana Villa](https://schechter.edu/who-are-our-descendants-those-whom-we-teach-parashat-bamidbar/)
<https://schechter.edu/who-are-our-descendants-those-whom-we-teach-parashat-bamidbar/>

On this Shabbat we begin to read the book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Pentateuch. In Hebrew it is called "Bamidbar", after the first significant word in the first verse.

After a census that is described in the first two chapters, the third chapter begins as follows:

These are the descendants of Aaron and Moses at the time that the LORD spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai.

These were the names of Aaron's sons: Nadab, the first-born, and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar.

The parashah begins by counting all males over 20 years of age that can bear arms, and the Levites and the priests are not included in this census. It then proceeds to count the Levites, from the age of one month on (as they could not bear arms, being over the age of 20 was not relevant) and among them the priests, descendants of Aaron. But first, according to the verse we just mentioned, the Torah is supposed to list Moses and Aaron's descendants. However, this is not the case! Only Aaron's sons are mentioned! It would seem that the text is incomplete. Why is this?

Rashi, the famous 11th century scholar and biblical commentator, based on a Talmudic comment by a scholar from the land of Israel, Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani in the name of Rabbi Jonathan, explained that if anyone who teaches his acquaintance's son Torah, it is as though he had fathered him.

RASHI: These are the generations (descendants) of Aaron and Moses – and Moses' sons are not recorded, only those of Aaron. And they are called the generations (descendants) of Moses, who taught Torah. If anyone who teaches his acquaintance's son Torah, it is as though he had fathered him.

Another famous scholar, Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish, went even further. It says in the book of Genesis that Abraham and his family actually "made" those people

who followed them to the land of Canaan, and that is what a teacher does for his student.

What does this mean? The influence of a teacher is much more significant than just transmitting knowledge or even methodology. A good teacher will actually help a student to obtain insights from what he or she learns that will influence the course of his or her life.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the 19th century Modern Orthodox scholar, understood that to “make” someone, means to actually create that person, by influencing the spiritual path to be followed. The Torah expects us to follow a spiritual as well as an ethical path, since ethical commandments are the basis for a truly religious way of life.

By paying attention to the particular way in which the Torah narrates its stories and noticing the contradictions, the missing pieces, the repetitive ones and so many other aspects of our most sacred book, we learn very important life messages. In this case, we learn about the importance of a teacher’s role from the fact that Moses’ sons’ names are not even mentioned.

A rabbi is first and foremost a teacher. Let us hope that our communities’ teachers and rabbis live up to the important task of showing our members, congregants and even our sporadic visitors that we see them as our spiritual children whom we hope to enrich with the important values our Torah teaches us, just as Moses influenced his nephews, whom the Torah describes as his own descendants. *(Diana Villa lectures at the Schechter Rabbinical School. A native of Argentina, she has degrees in Philosophy, Jewish Philosophy, Psychology and Talmud as well as rabbinic ordination. Rabbi Villa was a researcher at the Center for Women in Jewish Law, where she co-authored two books on halakhic solutions to the agunah problem and responsa on current issues. She represents The Schechter Institute at I.C.A.R. (International Coalition for Agunah Rights), and is a member of the steering committee and the Committee on Jewish Law of the Rabbinical Assembly in Israel.)*

Yahrtzeit

Jane Canter remembers her brother Benjamin Bishkoff on Sat May 20

Mike Schatzberg remembers his mother Marion Schatzberg on Wed May 24

Neal Fox remembers his mother Jeanette Fox on Fri May 26