

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Bamidbar
June 8, 2024 *** Sivan 2, 5784

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](#)

[Bamidbar: Liminal Space by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l 5771](#)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bamidbar/liminal-space/>

In English, the book we begin this week is called Numbers, and for an obvious reason. It begins with a census, and there is even a second count toward the end of the book. On this view, the central theme of the book is demography. The Israelites, still at Sinai at the beginning of the book, but on the brink of the Promised Land by its end, are now a sizeable nation, numbering 600,000 men of an age to embark on military service.

Within Jewish tradition however, this book has become known as Bamidbar, "in the wilderness," suggesting a very different theme. The superficial reason for the name is that this is the first distinctive word in the book's opening verse. But the work of two anthropologists, Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, suggest a deeper possibility. The fact that Israel's formative experience was in the wilderness turns out to be highly significant. For it is there that the people experience one of the Torah's most revolutionary ideas, namely that an ideal society is one in which everyone has equal dignity under the sovereignty of God.

Arnold Van Gennep, in his *The Rites of Passage*, argued that societies develop rituals to mark the transition from one state to the next – from childhood to adulthood, for example, or from being single to being married – and they involve three stages. The first is separation, a symbolic break with the past. The third is incorporation, re-entering society with a new identity. Between the two is the crucial stage of transition when, having said goodbye to who you were but not yet hello to who you are about to become, you are recast, reborn, refashioned.^[1]

Van Gennep used the term *liminal*, from the Latin word for *threshold*, to describe

this second state when you are in a kind of no-man's-land between the old and the new. That is clearly what the wilderness signifies for Israel: liminal space between Egypt and the Promised Land. There Israel is reborn, no longer a group of escaping slaves but "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The desert – a no-man's-land with no settled populations, no cities, no civilisational order – is the place where Jacob's descendants, alone with God, cast off one identity and assume another.

This analysis helps us understand some of the details of the book of Exodus. The daubing of the doorposts with blood ([Ex. 12:7](#)) is part of the first stage, the separation, during which time the door through which you walk as you leave your old life behind has special symbolic significance.

Likewise the division of the Red Sea. The division of one thing into two, through which something or someone passes, is a symbolic enactment of transition, as it was for Abraham in the passage in which God tells him about his children's future exile and enslavement ([Gen 15:10-21](#)). Abraham divides animals, God divides the sea, but the movement between the two halves is what signals the phase-change. Note also that Jacob has his two defining encounters with God in liminal space, during his journey from his home towards the dwelling of Laban ([Gen. 28:10-22](#), and [Gen. 32:22-32](#)).

Victor Turner added one additional element to this analysis. He drew a distinction between society and what he called *communitas*. Society is always marked by structure and hierarchy. Some have power, some don't. There are classes, castes, ranks, orders, gradations of status and honour.[\[2\]](#) For Turner what makes the experience of liminal space vivid and transformative is that in the desert there are no hierarchies. Instead, there is "an intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenised." People cast together in the no-man's-land of the desert experience the "essential and generic human bond." That is what he means by *communitas*, a rare and special state in which, for a brief but memorable period, everyone is equal.[\[3\]](#)

We now begin to understand the significance of *midbar*, "wilderness," in the spiritual life of Israel. It was the place where they experienced with an intensity they had never felt before nor would they easily again, the unmediated closeness of God which bound them to Him and to one another.

That is what Hosea means when he speaks in God's name of a day when Israel will experience, as it were, a second honeymoon:

"Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her . . . There she will respond as in the days of her

youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. "In that day," declares the Lord, "you will call Me 'my husband'; you will no longer call Me 'my Master.'" [Hos. 2:14-16](#)

We also now understand the significance of the account at the beginning of Bamidbar, in which the twelve tribes were encamped, in rows of three on the four sides of the Tabernacle, each equidistant from the holy. Each tribe was different, but (with the exception of the Levites) all were equal. They ate the same food, manna from heaven. They drank the same drink, water from a rock or well. None yet had lands of their own, for the desert has no owners. There was no economic or territorial conflict between them.

The entire description of the camp at the beginning of Bamidbar, with its emphasis on equality, fits perfectly Turner's description of *communitas*, the ideal state people only experience in liminal space where they have left the past (Egypt) behind but have not yet reached their future destination, the land of Israel. They have not yet begun building a society with all the inequalities to which society gives rise. For the moment they are together, their tents forming a perfect square with the Sanctuary at its centre.

The poignancy of the book of Bamidbar lies in the fact that this *communitas* lasted so briefly. The serene mood of its beginning will soon be shattered by quarrel after quarrel, rebellion after rebellion, a series of disruptions that would cost an entire generation their chance of entering the land.

Yet Bamidbar opens, as does the book of Bereishit, with a scene of blessed order, there natural, here social, there divided into six days, here into twelve (2×6) tribes, each person in Bamidbar like each species in Bereishit, in his or her rightful place, "each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house" ([Num. 2:1](#)).

So the wilderness was not just a place; it was a state of being, a moment of solidarity, midway between enslavement in Egypt and the social inequalities that would later emerge in Israel, an ideal never to be forgotten even if never fully captured again in real space and time.

Judaism never forgot its vision of natural and social harmony, set out respectively in the beginnings of the books of Genesis and Numbers, as if to say that what once was could be again, if only we heed the word of God. [1] Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, University of Chicago Press, 1960. [2] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, Transaction Publishers, 1969. [3] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, Cornell University Press, 1974.

I was always intrigued why the Hebrew title of the fourth book of the Torah is Bamidbar, which means “in the wilderness,” while the English is Numbers.

How did wilderness become numbers?

One of the possible ways to understand this mystery is by the fact that the Hebrew title places us in a particular place and time. It sets the stage for the story and gives us the big picture for the entire book.

In the first verse of the book, we find out that the story which is about to be told takes place in the wilderness, during the second year after our ancestors came out of Egypt: “On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, The Holy One spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, saying...” (**Numbers 1:1**)

The English title zooms in; it is very specific. It reveals nothing but the first story of this new book, in which God asks our leaders, Moses and Aaron, to take a census of the people.

At first sight, counting people can be seen as a mundane task, but if we go deeper and try to understand what it really means, what is the reason behind the counting of people, we find out that actually it is a big deal. To count to make sure that nobody is missing, to count to make sure that no one is forgotten, to count so that everyone will be seen and heard, because every single person matters.

Our tradition asks us to count all the time. It starts with the story of creation, in which the days are counted. We count years, months, days, and of course people. In fact, we are in the midst of counting the days of the Omer.

To count in Hebrew is *lispor*. It shares a root with *lesaper*, to tell a story, and *sipur*, the story itself. It is not a coincidence, because when we count we tell a story.

The stories we tell ourselves and others are important. They create narratives, shape identities, and make everlasting memories.

This year, as we begin to read the book of Numbers, as we are about to conclude the counting of the Omer, as we prepare ourselves to receive the Torah, and as we realize that it has been almost eight bloody months of the terrible war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, it is time to pause. Time to reflect. Time to count and time to ask ourselves, what is the story we tell ourselves and the world around us about this war, and how will it shape our future?

The story of *Sefer Bamidbar* took place in the wilderness, but it was clear that it was a temporary location for the Israelites. They were not planning to stay there

forever. The land of Israel was waiting for them; they were just not ready to go there yet.

This year, it feels like we are back in the wilderness, at least morally. How are we going to get out of here? How will we get ready to go back to our promised land? For the last eight months, we have been counting the days since October 7, counting the unbearable number of lost lives among our people and the Palestinian people, counting the number of lost soldiers, counting the number of hostages, counting the number of people who became refugees in their own land. We count and we count and we count. And we tell a story. Each and every one of us.

One day, when the war ends, we will be in a better place.

What will be the story we tell our children and grandchildren about this historic time we are living in?

How will we be able to share a story that is complex, filled with diverse angles and multifaceted narratives? A human tapestry of both tragedy and heroism, despair and hope, sadness and joy.

Let us not choose one side of the story, let us not be dominated by numbers. Instead, let us choose humanity, let us be able to see the divine spark in every single human being on each side, and let us strive to end the war, heal our wounds, and work together to achieve peace, safety, and security for all people.

Only when that happens, will we be ready to step out of the wilderness.

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[Becoming Like the Willderness: Bamidbar/Shavuot by Eitan Fishbane \(2017\)](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/becoming-like-the-wilderness-2/)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/becoming-like-the-wilderness-2/>

With the start of Sefer Bemidbar, the narrative of the Torah turns to the long journey of Benei Yisrael through the wilderness—punishment for the sin of the Golden Calf and preparation for entry into the Land of Israel. Passage into the sacred terrain first requires an arduous ordeal of wandering—a physical process of movement and quest. Penitence, pilgrimage, and transformation are anchored in the space of wilderness.

Moshe, too, after killing the Egyptian and prior to his divine call to leadership, retreats to the wilderness, a period of withdrawal into a space outside the habitation of society. It was only in that space, R. Bahya ben Asher suggests, far

from the yishuv (dwelling place) of the population, that Moshe could reenact the prophetic encounter of his ancestors, a withdrawal for the sake of spiritual and moral elevation (commentary to [Exod. 3:1](#)). Like Moshe the solitary shepherd, the people of Israel must undergo a spiritual transformation, a process of purification—from the impure state of idolatry to the refined condition necessary to enter the holy land. This purification is represented by the desolate nature of the wilderness—a vast emptiness that facilitates a breakthrough in mind and soul. As Kathleen Norris has written, evoking life on the Great Plains of Dakota as a spiritual practice:

Here the eye learns to appreciate slight variations, the possibilities inherent in emptiness. It sees that the emptiness is full of small things... A person is forced inward by the spareness of what is outward and visible in all this land and sky... Maybe seeing the Plains is like seeing an icon: what seems stern and almost empty is merely open, a door into some simple and holy state (Dakota, pp. 156-7).

The experience of what appears to be emptiness is an opening into another state of spiritual perception, an opening of the heart into the concealed indwelling of divine holiness. The sublime interior of the human soul is revealed in that moment of mystery and grandeur before the vastness of the All.

Likewise, R. Bahya asks, restating an earlier midrashic teaching (Tanhuma, 6; [Bemidbar Rabbah, 1:7](#)): why does the Torah emphasize God's speech to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai (בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי)? It was to teach that "a person does not attain the Torah until they have made themselves empty and abandoned like the wilderness" (אֵין אָדָם קוֹנֵה הַתּוֹרָה עַד שִׁיעֶשֶׂה עֲצָמוֹ הַפֶּקֶר כַּמִּדְבָּר) [commentary to [Num. 1:1](#)]. To receive the revelation of Torah—or perhaps a bit less grandly, to let Torah take root in one's heart—a person must first make themselves into a midbar, an inner empty wilderness that is cleared of all the weeds and brush that obstruct true perception and feeling. A wilderness that returns to the first purity of nature.

Just as divine revelation and the Torah arise from the physical space of wilderness, of midbar—at the burning bush and then at Mount Sinai—a heart infused with divine Torah arises through a person's mindful cultivation of their own interior wilderness. One should seek to attain the level of hefker—of feeling unbound by the pride and egoism of ownership, of being unattached to materialism. In hefker consciousness, we train our spiritual sight to see the Divine Presence that dwells beneath the surface, beneath the many golden calves of our obsessions, possessions, and wayward priorities. This is a radical reinvention of the

concept of *hefker*, a neutral halakhic category of abandonment and ownerlessness (e.g. [BT Eruvin, 45b](#)).

In this transformed reading, the *midbar* may be said to embody a pure state of emptiness—an inner cleansing that allows us to go deeper into the spiritual path. Becoming *hefker kemidbar* is a process of letting go of our imprisonment in materiality, in ephemeral and finite desires—to be liberated into the vastness of an inner wilderness. As R. Nahman of Bratzlav taught (*Likutei Moharan* I:52), the most profound opening of the heart to God takes place in the physical space of darkness and wilderness, the frightening ground of loneliness and alienation. It is in *hitbodedut* (solitude) that we are able to empty our minds and hearts of society's overwhelming drumbeat, where the ultimate *bitul hayeish* (erasure of superficial, mundane consciousness) becomes possible, and we are truly opened in all of our vulnerability before Divinity. In that place of *midbar*, we are able to break open the heart in ways we didn't know were possible, to cry out to God from a place of the deepest emotional honesty. The *midbar* is an inner place of psyche as much as it is a terrestrial location.

But it was *hefker kemidbar* as a state of moral piety that was first articulated by the Sages (see [BT Sanhedrin, 49a](#); Bahya ben Asher, *Kad Hakemah*, "Orhim"; Metzudat Davidon [I Kings 2:34](#)), and this interpersonal dimension remains a powerful feature of the ideal to which we aspire. As these sources teach, one should make one's home *hefker kemidbar*, free and open for all—cultivating an ethic of hospitality in which the poor and the less fortunate feel free to come and be cared for. The model of wilderness, of *midbar*, is here taken to be an inspiration to live a life of openness and kindness toward other human beings. As the modern monk Thomas Merton said: "The speech of God is silence. His Word is solitude...It is in deep solitude and silence that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brother and my sister" (*Entering the Silence*, 2:398). In this reading, *hefker* is understood in the most charitable and positive sense of "free for all," as opposed to the more pejorative meaning of *hefker* as a chaotic and uncontrolled "free-for-all." The openness of a *midbar*-state-of-being is one that inspires kindness and generosity: the gentleness needed to sincerely love one's fellow person. That gentleness is the silent speech of God flowing through man and woman to be realized as moral living. Integrating Merton's insight with the Jewish sources we have considered, the retreat of solitude is filled with the living word of God, the breath of divine sustenance. It is our spiritual work to let that divine solitude refine the openness and gentleness with which we treat our fellow human beings.

To paraphrase the teaching: You will attain the true soul of Torah only when you have made yourself *hefker kemidbar*—a person cleansed of superficial obsessions,

gentle and generous toward other people, one who has nullified the grip of pride and egoism. As the early Hasidic rebbe R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk (Pri Ha'aretz, Letter 27) taught, true wisdom and humanity rises from the cultivation of deep humility:

The Torah only stands firm in one who makes himself like a midbar hefker before those who are poor of mind and rich of mind, and he doesn't think of himself as better than his friend. On the contrary, he should be completely nullified before his friend, and it is through this that they become united and bound up one with the other.

True spiritual refinement, the deepest attainment of hefker kemidbar, must not remain at the level of individualistic mystical growth and the personal quest for divine revelation. To realize the ideals of piety, to ensconce the living Torah in the wholeness of oneself, a person must aspire toward a genuine humility, to avoid the harmful path of judgmentalism and arrogance. It is in the bond of loving friendship and fellowship, in kindness and humility toward the other, that the Torah—and God—are most radiantly revealed. (*Eitan Fishbane is Professor of Jewish Thought at JTS*)

Naked as the Desert: Parashat Bamidbar 5784 by Rabbi David Kasher
<https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/naked-desert>

The five books of the Torah—like the 54 parshiyot—are by tradition¹ each named after their first significant word or phrase. In the case of the fourth book, the name is taken from half of a semikhut (construct) phrase: “בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי - in the Sinai Desert” (bemidbar Sinai). The custom has developed to use just the first of the two words: bemidbar,² meaning just: “In the Desert.” That leaves us with a particularly evocative title, one that casts us out into a vast unknown, and vaguely suggests impending danger.

It is a title that speaks well to the themes of this book, for the Children of Israel do indeed face all kinds of dangers out there in the desert. There are the expected perils of travel: attack or starvation. But even more prominent are the crises that continually erupt from within the group: panic leads to doubt in the mission; internal power struggles result in all-out mutiny; lewd displays of orgiastic idolatry provoke violent conflict.

What is it about being “in the desert” that pushes this newly formed society to all of its breaking points? Is the harsh landscape bringing out something harsh and terrible in the people who wander through it?

Long after the 40-year desert journey had ended, the great prophets of Israel

continued to recall the image of the Sinai Desert in their poetry, interweaving it with other biblical references to develop a rich tapestry of “desert metaphors” for our relationship with God.

The first to do so was Moshe himself, whose own final formal poem, in Parashat Ha’azinu, begins working with what will become a trope that recurs in the later prophets: the image of God “finding” the people of Israel in the desert:

Deuteronomy 32:10-11

He found him in a desert region, in the howling void of a wasteland.
He encircled him, watched over him, guarded him like the pupil of His eye.
Like an eagle who rouses his nestlings, and hovers over his eaglets.
So did He spread His wings and take him, and carried him along with their strength.

Moshe imagines the Children of Israel in the desert as a baby bird, tenderly attended to by their father eagle, and then carried away on his wings. This image surely is a callback to the description in Exodus (19:4) of God carrying us out “ על כנפי נשרים - on eagle’s wings.” But Moshe artfully embeds in these two successive verses two other callback words, both of which take us back to the same verse. Because the noun, for this howling void, תהו (tohu), and the verb for our eagle’s hovering, לרחף (lrahef), can each only be found in one other place in the Torah,³ way back in its second verse:

Genesis 1:2

And the earth was void and chaos, and darkness was on the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the water.

The void of the vast, barren desert reminds Moshe of the great void that preceded the world. There was nothing but a howling, primordial chaos. But there was a presence, a spirit of God “hovering” there, the Torah says, as if we could hear the flutter of its wings. That presence would soon speak and bring light out of the darkness and, eventually, bring humanity into the light of this new world.

Moshe is thinking about that presence, and he can hear that fluttering sound when he imagines God as a great eagle coming down from the sky, to pick us up and deliver us from darkness. In the desert of the world, there is hope.

Many centuries later, the prophet Hoshea, railing against the people of Israel on God’s behalf, paints a far less hopeful image of the desert. In his metaphor, God is an angry and abusive husband railing against his cheating wife, the people of Israel:

Hosea 2:4-5

Rebuke your mother, rebuke her! For she is no longer my wife and I am no longer her husband! And have her remove her harlotry off her face, and the adultery lodged between her breasts. Lest I strip her down naked and present her as she was on the day of her birth. And I will make her like a desert, render her like a wilderness land, and let her die of thirst.

This time the desert is not where God finds us, but where God leaves us to die. The “adultery” here is a metaphor for idolatry, and a reference surely to the idolatry in Hoshea’s own time, but in the long relationship of this husband and wife pair, it also recalls all the old “affairs,” going back to the Golden Calf. But what is the meaning of this reference to the “nakedness” of our infancy? What was the day we were born? Rabbeinu Behaye, in his commentary on Exodus (33:4), just after the people have built the Golden Calf and God is threatening to abandon them, refers to these verses from Hosea, and offers an explanation:

Rabbeinu Behaye on Exodus 33:4

This is like what Hoshea said, “Lest I strip her down naked and present her as she was on the day of her birth”—that is, lest I strip from Israel the glory of my Presence, which they had been cloaked in, and leave them naked, as they were before the Torah was given, for that was like the day of their birth.

Our time of national nakedness was the period between the Exodus from Egypt and our receiving of the Law at Mount Sinai. We were freed into existence, but we remained exposed and vulnerable, without any guidance or purpose. It was only when we were given the commandments that we became clothed, wrapped up lovingly in the covenant. These laws would be our protection from the elements, our layer of defense against the dangers of the world.

So why, then—now that we have left Mount Sinai, with the laws of Exodus and Leviticus well in hand, and we are heading out into the desert—does Hoshea suggest that we may become naked again?

Hoshea gives us a clue with his word for nakedness: ערומה (arumah). This word also has its origins early on in Genesis. In fact, it is in the Garden of Eden narrative where we find the only use of the word in the Torah. Adam and Havah are in the infancy of their lives. And, we are told:

Genesis 2:25

The two of them were naked, the man and his wife and they felt no shame.

Of course they felt no shame. This was the nakedness of innocence, an unconscious nakedness. In such a state they were meant to stay. Their lives would be carefree and pleasant, a kind of eternal childhood, with no labor or responsibility.

They had but one rule to follow. Alas, they broke that rule right away. They ate from the tree, and gained the knowledge of good and bad. And in the first moment after eating, the very first thing they came to understand was:

Genesis 3:7

Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized that they were naked, and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths. Again they are naked, but now they experience it very differently. Before they never even noticed. Now they have the knowledge to know how exposed they are, and they are ashamed. So they rush to cover themselves.

This is the state the people of Israel find themselves in, out there in the Sinai Desert. They were naked when God first found them—but they were so new to the world, they hardly knew the difference. Then God “robed” them with commandments, and they were protected with the assurance of a clear path. But no sooner had they forged this covenant with God than they broke it. First they built a Golden Calf and danced around it in idolatrous ecstasy. That was the most blatant rejection of the commandments. But the transgressions continued to spill out as they wandered into the desert: greed, jealousy, anger, lust, and so much violence. Through sin after sin they unwrapped themselves, stripping layer by layer until they were naked again, barren like the desert itself. That will be the story of Bemidbar.

Like Adam and Havah, the people will eventually have to come to realize that they are naked, that they have damaged their relationship with God, and been cast out into the world alone, exposed and vulnerable. They will have to figure out how to rebuild the broken trust, and to “dress” themselves once again in the garments of Torah. It will be in the next and final book of the Torah, Devarim, that they once again take on new mitzvot, and once again stand before God and enter into a covenant.

This is the journey that lies ahead for the Children of Israel. But insofar as Moshe and Hoshea have cast the images of the desert back onto the earliest stories in Genesis—of the creation of the world and the origins of humanity—they have invited us to see in that desert journey the arc of a universal journey, that all people must walk through. Just as the world is birthed out of a void, so do we all emerge from darkness into light. We begin our lives in innocence, naked and totally dependent on those who brought us into being. When we are ready, they

begin to give us rules to live by, guidance for walking safely through the desert of the world. But like Adam and Havah in the garden, and like our ancestors in the desert, we, too, are only human, and we will inevitably break the rules, make terrible mistakes, and be stripped down once again. This time, knowing better, we will be without innocence and full of shame.

We will have to learn how to sew new clothes for ourselves, to repair the damage we have done to our relationships—with each other and with God—and then to trudge forward through the desert of our lives. We take hope from our ancestors who, despite all their struggles in the desert, eventually made it to the other side and entered the Promised Land. *(David Kasher is Director of Hadar West Coast)*

1. We can date this tradition as far back to the geonic period (Rav Sa’adia Gaon uses it, for example). The Talmud, however, refers to this book in several places as חומש הפקודים, literally the Fifth of Counting. See Yoma 68b. This meaning parallels the Greek name for the book, *Arithmoi*, which then becomes the English, “Numbers.”

This talmudic naming tradition also emphasizes the holistic nature of the first five books of Moshe’s prophecy, referring to them not as “books” but “fifths” of one great book. Ironically we now more commonly refer to each fifth as a book (e.g. Sefer Bemidbar) and the only lasting legacy of that older tradition is that we often refer to the **whole** Torah as the Humash.

2. When I was younger, it was much more common to see the name written as “Bamidbar,” with an “a” as the first vowel. It has become increasingly standard to write the name instead with an “e” as the first vowel: Bemidbar. The reason for this is that as the word appears in the verse, there is a *sheva* under the *bet*, rather than a *patah*, so it is indeed pronounced, *bemidbar*. However, that is because the word is in a *semikhut* with the next word in the verse and the grammar of this construction causes the vowel under the *bet* to shorten. But when the word is used independently, as a name, and the word Sinai drops off, it seems to me that it should retain the *patah* vowelization (*bamidbar*). Otherwise, the name of the book would mean “In **a** desert,” rather than “In **the** desert.” We often change the form of the word from the verse itself when it turns into the name of a *parashah* or a whole book of the Torah. The Book of Devarim, for example, is not called, *ha-Devarim*, though that is how the word appears in the verse. 3. See Ibn Ezra, who notes connection in his commentary on Genesis 1:2

Yahrtzeits

- Mike Schatzberg remembers his mother Marion Schatzberg on Monday June 10th
- Neal Fox remembers his mother Jeanette Fox on Wednesday June 12th
- Lisa Small remembers her mother Ruby Small on Friday June 14th.
- Gail Yazersky remembers her father Martin Yazersky on Friday June 14th