



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Bamidbar (בְּמִדְבָּר, "In the desert")**
- **Chapters: Numbers 1:1-4:20**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

The Book of Numbers begins precisely where the Book of Exodus left off, with the glory of the LORD hovering over the Tabernacle as the Israelites camped at Sinai. On the first day of the thirteenth month following the Exodus from Egypt – exactly thirty days after the Tabernacle was first consecrated – God commanded Moses to take a *census* of all Israelite males over 20 years of age who would bear arms. Moses and the heads of each tribe recorded the results, with 603,550 men in all. This number did not include the Levites, however, since they were designated to take care of the Tabernacle and its furnishings during the journeys.

God then gave instructions about how the Israelite camp was to be arranged. The Tabernacle would occupy the *central* location, with three clans of the Levites surrounding it on the north, south, and west (Moses and Aaron's tents were placed before the entrance on the east). The twelve other tribes were divided into four groups of three, each of which had its own flag and tribal leader's tent. All of the tents of the Israelites were to face the Tabernacle on every side. This camp formation was to be strictly maintained while traveling throughout the desert.

A general *census of the Levites* was then performed. Originally all firstborn sons of Israel were to serve as their family's priest, but because of the sin of the Golden Calf, this privilege was revoked, and the Levites (who did not participate in that sin) were chosen instead. God instructed Moses to count all male Levites *over the age of one month*, with a result of 22,000. He then counted all the firstborn sons of Israel and discovered there were 22,273. Since there were 273 more firstborn Israelites than male Levites to represent them, those who lacked a corresponding Levite (as determined by lot) had to pay a five-shekel "ransom" (i.e., fine) to redeem themselves.

Within the tribe of Levi three separate *family clans* were counted, based on the lineage of Levi's three sons, *Gershon*, *Kohath*, and *Merari*. Each of these clans was assigned special duties to help Aaron and his sons do the work of the Tabernacle. The clan of Gershon was responsible for the woven materials of the Tabernacle, the clan of Merari handled the wooden framework as well as the courtyard and its sockets, and the clan of Kohath was responsible for carrying the sacred furnishings themselves. Note that *Aaron and his two sons* (i.e., Eleazar and Ithamar) were part of the Kohathite clan, though they alone were separated for special service. The Kohathites were warned not to directly touch any of the sacred objects, however, and only Aaron and his sons were permitted to insert the carrying poles and cover the objects before they could be moved.



Basic Questions

1. Why did God count the people of Israel? ¹
2. Why was the census taken *30 days after* the Tabernacle was consecrated? ²
3. What was the total number of Israelite males over the age of 20 counted in the census? ³
4. According to the sages, how were the people counted? ⁴
5. Why were Moses' sons not part of the leadership of Israel? ⁵
6. At the time of the census, which was the largest tribe? Which the smallest? ⁶
7. What are the three main "subgroups" or family clans within the Levites? ⁷
8. How were the subgroups of Levites arranged around the Tabernacle? ⁸
9. Why do the sages say that the tribe of Levi was not as populous as the other tribes? ⁹
10. The Torah lists the total number of Gershonites, Kohathites, and Merarites as 22,300, but also states the total number of Levites as 22,000. How do you explain this discrepancy? ¹⁰
11. How were the 12 tribes arranged around the Tabernacle? ¹¹
12. Which tribe faced the gate to the Tabernacle? ¹²
13. How did the tribes know when to break camp and travel? ¹³
14. What is *Pidyon Haben*, and who makes one today? ¹⁴

¹ Because of His great love, God counts his people all the time. He counted Israel when they first left Egypt (Exod. 12:37); when He came to manifest His presence (Exod. 30:11-15) and again when the Tabernacle was erected (Exod. 38:25-28). A month later, He counted them just before the people left Sinai.

² As a period of mourning (avelut) for Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu who died on Nisan 1.

³ 603,550, which did not include the Levites, women, children, or members of the "mixed multitude." According to Jewish tradition, this meant there were from two to three million people who left Egypt during the Exodus.

⁴ Each person gave a half-shekel (machatzit ha-shekel) and the total was then counted. Persons themselves were not numbered since that would invite God's judgment of the records. Even today a minyan is counted using kippas.

⁵ Because they did not experience the Exodus from Egypt and did not cross the sea with the people of Israel, since they remained in Midian with Jethro, Moses' father-in-law (Exod. 18:1-6).

⁶ Judah (74,600) and Levi (22,300).

⁷ The Kohathites (8,600), Gershonites (7,500), and Merarites (6,200), each group was responsible for helping maintain the Tabernacle. Note that Aaron and his sons (i.e., the priests) were actually part of the Kohathite clan, though they were separated for special service.

⁸ The Gershonites buffered the west end, the Merarites the south, and the Kohathites the north. Moses and Aaron's tents were placed on the east end, directly before the entrance to the Tabernacle compound itself.

⁹ To counteract the Egyptian decrees, God greatly increased the numbers of the Israelites whose lives were made bitter with hard labor (Exod. 1:12), but since the Levites were never enslaved, they increased only at a natural rate.

¹⁰ Rashi states that the extra 300 were firstborn sons and therefore needed to be "redeemed."

¹¹ Each tribe camped in the same positions as the sons of Jacob stood when they came before him for the blessing.

¹² The Tribe of Judah, from which would come the Messiah Yeshua (the "Shiloh" prophecy).

¹³ The Shekhinah Cloud would move away from the Tabernacle.

¹⁴ A symbolic ceremony of giving 5 shekels to a priest for the redemption of a firstborn son (called a bechor).



Advanced Questions

15. Why did each tribe have a different flag when the Israelites were one nation? ¹⁵
16. Why were Jewish men under the age of 20 not allowed to fight in Israel's battles? ¹⁶
17. Why did God want Levite guards standing at attention in the Tabernacle? ¹⁷
18. Why did God require a census when He already knows everything? ¹⁸
19. According to Jewish legend, how did Moses count the babies of the Levites? ¹⁹
20. According to midrash, what happened to a Levite who switched his job? ²⁰
21. What carried those who carried it? ²¹
22. Who traveled through the desert walking backwards? ²²
23. What is unclean that carries the clean? ²³
24. Why did God reveal the Torah in the desert, rather than in the Promised Land? ²⁴
25. Why was Judah stationed on the eastern side of the Tabernacle? ²⁵
26. Why does the Torah suggest that we seclude ourselves in the "desert" at times? ²⁶
27. Why is a Torah teacher to be regarded as a "father" to his students? ²⁷

¹⁵ To indicate that the Jewish people were twelve "nations" united as one people of God. The flag of Judah was distinctive, however, because it was the color of the sky with a fiery lion emblazoned upon it.

¹⁶ "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 life" (Avot 5:24).

¹⁷ Though God did not need any guards, it was a sign of honor and "palace protocol." Though the Levites were not to serve in the military, they were recognized as the fighting force against idolatry (based on Phinehas).

¹⁸ When someone has a collection of precious valuables, it is a pleasure to count them again and again. Counting someone also means recognizing their worth in the eyes of God. You matter!

¹⁹ God instructed him to walk up to the tents, and a "Bat Kol" (heavenly voice) would tell the number to him.

²⁰ A Levite who did the work of a Kohen or did the work of another clan of the Levites was to be "cut off" (i.e., judged by heaven to eventually die an untimely death).

²¹ The ark of the covenant miraculously carried those who carried it. Drash: As we "lift" the Torah, it carries us!

²² The Kohathites who carried the ark of the covenant in front were required not to turn their backs to the ark.

²³ The donkey is unclean (tamei) but was used to carry the Messiah into Jerusalem (Zech 9:9; Matt. 21:2-5).

²⁴ To indicate that it is available for all people. Likewise God chose nondescript Mt. Sinai as a token of His humility.

²⁵ Because it was closest to the entrance, as befits the King of Israel. Also, the eastern entrance faced the sun, suggesting the future glory of the Messiah.

²⁶ The Hebrew word *midbar* ("desert") shares the same root as *davar* which means "word." Sometimes we need to be alone to hear God speaking *kol demamah dakkah*, "the sound of a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12). Yeshua Himself spent time in the desert, as did John the Baptist, etc.

²⁷ The teacher who influences you most for heaven is a "virtual father." According to the early sages, a teacher "adopts" his students and is responsible for them as his own children, and likewise the children are to esteem him as a spiritual father. This is based on how Elisha cried to Elijah: "My father! My father!" (2 Kings 2:12).



28. Why was the tribe of Levi not counted with the rest of Israel? ²⁸
29. (Midrash) Where did the “Well of Miriam” settle when Israel camped in the desert? ²⁹
30. The Torah states that the Israelites were to be known by the house of their fathers (not their mothers). If a father belonged to one tribe, and a mother to another, to which tribe would the child belong? ³⁰

Discussion Topics

1. The sages note that the idea of a census expresses two paradoxical truths. On the one hand, it implies that each individual is significant, while on the other hand, it implies that each member of the community - from the greatest to the lowliest - counts for no more and no less than “one.” Discuss the balance between the value of the individual verses the value of the group. Relate this to the metaphor of “members of one body” that the Apostle Paul used when he described the ideal hierarchy and community of the church (1 Cor. 12).
2. Why did God count just the adult *males* of Israel? Didn’t the women and children count, or was the census primarily for the sake of military “utility”? And what about the “mixed multitude” (i.e., those Gentiles who tagged along with Israel during the Exodus from Egypt)? Not only were members of this group ineligible to serve in the army, they were *excluded* from the camp, and therefore were clearly designated as “outsiders” (and even a burden on Israel). Moreover, why were the Levites set apart as a “higher caste” in this system, and indeed, why were Aaron and his sons regarded as the “highest caste” of all? Do you find such stratification unfair, or do you see the need for a hierarchical order for society? *Discuss...*
3. On a “macro level,” the Torah tells the story of our pilgrimage to Zion, the mountain of the LORD that will one day fill the whole earth.... Genesis describes our creation and fall; Exodus describes our bondage and deliverance; Leviticus describes the walk of holiness; and Numbers describes the test and refinement of our faith (Deuteronomy is “mishneh Torah,” the retelling and review of the inner meaning of the first four books). Discuss some of the themes of the Book of Numbers in light of this grand narrative.
4. In a sense, we are all “living in the desert” as we await the final redemption. What are you learning as you walk with God through the wilderness of this world?
5. The formation of the camp of Israel was set up with military precision. How does the idea that God would engage His people in war with other nations fit with Yeshua’s view of “turning the other cheek” and loving our enemies? Is there a difference here between national and personal ethics? When is “spiritual warfare” justified? Is it ever right to hate the enemies of God? What about Satan? Should we be willing to show love for the evil one?

²⁸ Since there would be a decree of death in the desert upon those who accepted the evil report of the spies, God spared the Levites since they were not part of the spying mission (Num. 13-14).

²⁹ It “rolled along” with the camp and would finally rest in the courtyard of the Tabernacle, where the water would flow out from there. This foreshadows the coming Temple of Messiah when water will flow out from its midst.

³⁰ The father’s tribe. This custom holds to this day: A kohen, Levite, or Israelite derives from the father’s side (though if a non-Jewish man fathers a child with a Jewish woman, the child is regarded as Jewish).



6. “His banner over me is love” (Song 2:4). Each camp (tribe) of Israel had their own flag as a token of their identity and place in the kingdom (Num. 2:2). How important is the idea of your heritage and ancestry? Do you feel that you are a “member of the tribe”? Do you believe you have a place at God’s banqueting table? What is it that makes you a “child of God”? Do you have assurance that you are a member in God’s house? (see Rom. 8:16).
7. As a follow up question, since everyone has a need to belong, how do you help people feel welcomed and valued in your life?
8. Numbers 2:2 reads, “Every one of the Israelites must camp under his standard with the emblems of his family; they must camp at some *distance* (מִנְיָן) around the tent of meeting.” In the Book of Joshua, the people were further instructed to keep 3,000 feet away from the Ark of the Covenant (Josh. 3:4), which the rabbis later interpreted to mean that there should be a “walking limit” (*eruv*) of no more than 3,000 feet beyond one’s house on the Sabbath. Discuss the idea of boundaries for the community and its benefits and limitations.
9. Some rabbis argue that the reason the Levites were counted from the age of one month up was because a newborn baby is not regarded as “viable” until it reaches 30 days of life. In Jewish tradition, if an infant dies before reaching 30 days, no funeral or mourning practices are observed. The Pidyon Haben ceremony is also required for a firstborn only after the baby reaches 30 days of life, no sooner. On the other hand, a baby boy is required to be circumcised on the eighth day of life and the Torah defines the “breath of life” as an indication of the presence of the divinely imparted soul (*nefesh*). Indeed, many people believe that God creates the soul at the time of conception, and the prophets speak of God’s knowledge of us *before* we were born. For instance, God told Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer. 1:5, Gal. 1:15), and likewise the Psalmist declares: “Your eyes saw my embryo (נֶלֶם) when I was inside the womb. All the days ordained for me were recorded in your scroll before one of them came into existence” (Psalm 139:16). Do you think that God individually creates each human soul, or is it somehow “passed down” or inherited through Adam? This has implications for the idea of “original sin” (and spiritual rebirth). *Discuss...*
10. The death of Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, are mentioned again in this portion, which the sages say indicates God’s *heartache* over them. Every time their death is mentioned, their offense is also cited: “they offered strange fire.” What do you think this phrase means? Have you ever risked offering “strange fire” before God?
11. The reading of parashat Bamidbar always occurs close to the holiday of Shavuot (Pentecost). In the New Testament, “tongues of fire” appeared “strange” to the Jewish pilgrims who gathered there to celebrate the giving of the Torah. Discuss the irony of Shavuot, especially in light of the warnings found in the Book of Numbers regarding walking in faith...
12. It has been rightly said that the Book of Numbers displays both the “goodness and the severity of God” (Rom. 11:22). The New Testament cites various acts of rebellion mentioned in the book as “parables” or examples that were recorded so that we might be warned to keep our faith resolute (1 Cor. 10:6, 11). Discuss why the New Testament teaches that the stories in the Book of Numbers were intended to warn us of the consequences of *unbelief*.



13. Why does God bring His people into the desert? The Hebrew word *midbar* (“desert”) shares the same root as the word *davar* which means “word.” When God spoke the Torah to Moses, it was from a nondescript mountain (Sinai) – a place of emptiness, brokenness and need – which therefore suggests the word of *humility*. Indeed, another word for Sinai is *Chorev*, a word that refers to the dryness and desolation. That is the starting point – not the lush places of future promise. We receive Torah “bamidbar” (in the desert) because we can only hear God’s *davar* in a place of humility and inner quiet. God brings us to an arid place – inhospitable, and dangerous – to reveal our need for Him. This is a necessary excursion to prepare us to look for the greater hope of Zion. *Discuss...*
14. The Book of Numbers marks the end of the historical narrative of the Torah, since it briefly describes the Israelites arrival at the end of their journey, the impending death of Moses, and the appointment of Joshua as the new leader of the people (the Book of Deuteronomy presents Moses’ final sermon before he died). The Torah leaves us in the desert, waiting for a *new generation* under the leadership of Joshua (another name for Yeshua) to lead the people into their inheritance. In what ways have you crossed the Jordan and defeated the “giants” in your life? Are you in the land or in the desert?

For Next Week:

- Read Parashat **Naso** (Numbers 4:21-7:89)
- Read the Haftarah (Judges 13:2-25)
- Read the New Testament (Acts 21:17-26)

