

PARASHAH: B'midbar (In the desert)
ADDRESS: B'midbar (Numbers) 1:1-4:20
READING DATE: Shabbat
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

This week we begin the fourth book of Moshe, called **B'midbar**. Its English name comes from the fact that the initial chapters begin with a census taken of the entire assembly of 'Am Yisra'el (People of Isra'el). Our parashah is very informative where the Tribes are concerned. Historically, the people stood poised to enter the Land which was promised to them through the Avot (Fathers), Avraham, Yitz'chak, and Ya'akov. War with the immediate inhabitants of the Land was inevitable, and HaShem was masterfully preparing a suitable army of those (20 years and older) who would be able to go in and fight.

The Big Picture

The discontented whining of a young child can be difficult to ignore. Likewise, the childlike whining of 'Am Yisra'el in the wilderness characterizes the book of B'midbar. Here is a brief overview:

This book picks up where Sh'mot (Exodus) leaves off—with 'Am Yisra'el camped at the base of Har Sinai. From here the people journeyed into the wilderness (b'midbar) of Paran, south of the Promised Land. Scouts were sent to explore the Land and give a report on its inhabitants. When they returned to the camp, their report was not favorable, and the people began to doubt HaShem's ability to give them their inheritance, and they complained against him. Because of their sin, God condemned them to wander in the wilderness until the generation of k'vetchers (complainers) died off and a new generation took their place. Forty years later they slowly made their way back to Kena'an (Canaan)—this time

ready to obey the mitzvot of ADONAI. After winning some important campaigns east of the Yarden River (Jordan), 'Am Yisra'el prepared to enter the heart of the Promised Land they had waited so long to see.

We are very familiar with the 40 years of wandering that the people would eventually have to endure as a result of their doubt. The number 40 signals trials, testing, endurance, and sometimes punishment. The Stone Edition TaNaKH, however, has this to say about the book of B'midbar:

'The Book of Numbers begins and ends with Isra'el on the verge of entering its Land—but the thirty-eight intervening years of wandering in the Wilderness were a low point in Jewish history. This Book contains the episodes of the spies, who poisoned the minds of the people, the rebellion of Korah and his assembly, and the error of Moshe and Aharon that cost them the privilege of entering the land. But it also ends with the first step in the conquest of the Land of Isra'el.'

Mixing my own comments (*italics*) with theirs, they also add:

'In Talmudic and Rabbinic literature, the Book is known as Chumash HaPekudim, the Book of Numbers, because as previously mentioned, one of its major themes is the census of the people. In the first few chapters of our parashah, the members of the tribes were counted individually, as every Jew passed in front of Moshe and Aharon and presented proof of his tribal descent. What an awesome experience it must have been for even the humblest Jew to stand before his two leaders—the greatest prophet who ever lived (*next to Yeshua*), and God's holy servant—to identify himself and to receive their blessing and guidance! Once counted, the tribes were arrayed around the Mishkan (Tabernacle), demonstrating that the Sh'khinah (Manifest Presence of HaShem) was their rallying point, the central focus of the nation, then and always. For Jews are a nation by virtue of the gracious giving of the Torah of HaShem; it is their *raison d'etre*. By accepting it they became a people, and by following it they remain a people. To disown the Covenant is to fall outside of the calling of being a Covenant People. HaShem does not operate outside of covenants. *Historically for today, his grace and mercy operate only within the scope of the covenant that his Son Yeshua HaMashiach has initiated.*'

There in the wilderness, the people were to encamp around the Mishkan which contained the Tablets of the Torah (the Ten Words), and march with it wherever God led them. That leitmotif of Jewish nationhood would continue throughout its history. As it has been aptly said, "More than the Jews have preserved the Sabbath, the Sabbath has preserved the Jews."

The Worth of a Man

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki) notes at the beginning of the Book that God counted the nation at every significant turn because he loves it. So too, the fact that the people were counted as individuals proves the infinite worth of every Jew, and sets the precedent for God's undying love to see every one of his created subjects return to a loving relationship with him through his Unique and Only Son. Certainly it would have been easier and quicker to count the people en masse, and that would have been the proper course if all that mattered were sheer numbers. But that would have caused the individual to be an insignificant member of the total community and it would have obscured his personal responsibility to grow and contribute. Each tribe had its own uniqueness to contribute to the national well-being and each individual was precious in his own right.

In chapter 2 verse 2 we read,

"Each person shall camp near the banner carrying his paternal family's insignia. They shall camp at a distance around the Communion Tent."

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), the first Chief Rabbi of the Land of Isra'el has these insightful words to add concerning the Tribes and the banners that they bore:

Throughout their sojourn in the desert, the Israelites were commanded to set up their tents around tribal flags:

What is the significance of these banners?

The Midrash says that the inspiration for the banners came from Sinai. The Revelation of the Torah was attended by 22,000 chariots of angels, each one decked out with flags. The Israelites immediately desired to have flags just like the angels - and God agreed. *"He brought me to the wine-house, and His banner over me is love."* [Song 2:4]

This Midrash indicates that banners relate to some intrinsic aspect of angels, though not of people. But the Midrash leaves us with many questions. What does it mean that angels bear flags? Why does the verse refer to Sinai as a 'wine-house?' And what is the connection between banners and love?

The Zohar states that the banners of the four major encampments (in each direction: north, south, east and west) corresponded to the four 'faces' of the mystical chariot mentioned in the beginning of Ezekiel. These four 'faces' are fundamental Divine attributes. Thus each encampment related to a particular Divine attribute.

What is an angel? The Hebrew word "*mal'ach*" literally means 'messenger'. The very essence of an angel is to fulfill a particular Divine mission. An angel cannot perform a task, important though it may be, other than the specific mission for which it was designated.

The people desired flags like those the angels bore at Sinai. They wanted every individual to be able to choose a form of Divine service which suits his personality, just as each angel executes a very specific function, as defined by his flag.¹

Again, this testifies of the uniqueness and importance of each and every single individual in God's economy. But we shall see this fully developed as God himself makes provisions for each human, Jew and Gentile, to join his wonderful Family.

Each person is precious in his own right!

So it remains true today, as has been demonstrated by Yeshua's obedience even unto death!

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only and unique Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may have eternal life instead of being utterly destroyed.” (John 3:16, emphasis mine)

Also,

“For the passage quoted says that *everyone* who rests his trust on him will not be humiliated. That means that there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—*ADONAI* is the same for everyone, rich toward everyone who calls on him, since *everyone* who calls on the name of *ADONAI* will be delivered.” (Rom. 10:11-13, emphasis his)

And again in another place,

“...for it is not his purpose that anyone should be destroyed, but that everyone should turn from his sins.” (2 Pet. 3:9c)

So we see that God is interested in each individual—not just whole tribes! True, this book tells how the nation slid and an entire generation had to remain in the Wilderness and expire. But their children emerged strong and courageous, still gathered around the Mishkan and ready to claim its destiny as the heirs to the blessings of Avraham, Yitz'chak and Ya'akov.

The closing blessing is as follows:

¹ Adapted from *Midbar Shur*, pp. 24-25.

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v’chay-yeh o’lam nata-b’tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

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