

## BEMIDBAR SELECTED SHORTS

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May 15, 2021 4 Sivan 5781

במדבר א':א

(א) וַיִּדְבֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי בְּאֶהֱל מוֹעֵד בְּאֶהֱל לְחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁנַי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִית לְצֵאתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְאֶמְרָ:

### Numbers 1:1

(1) On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, saying...

So much information compressed in that first verse. We are in the desert. It's year two. The exodus is behind us. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes the contrast between Numbers and Exodus. Exodus is the "journey from". Numbers is the "journey towards". Breaking out of something has a totally different narrative configuration than making your way towards something. He offers that one is easier than the other. The drama of revolution and disruption is easy; creating a functioning, stable society is hard. Look at history. Or better, look at the news.

*Wilderness: The wilderness bewilders; it undermines the very ability to speak, to know one's own experience. Its emptiness dwarfs the force of one's imagination. It is the burial site of the great enterprise of redemption that lies at the heart of this book.* (Aviva Zornberg). Zornberg ... thinks of the Israelites' 40-year journey through the wilderness as "a therapeutic experience. This period of constant complaints, rebellions, and vociferous lack of faith is the nascent nation's collective cathartic experience. A core fantasy is being worked through." Even as an entire generation perishes in the wilderness, the people learns to speak of its subjective experience. (Beth Kissileff). The Midrash likens Torah to a wilderness: It has to be as ownerless as wilderness. Scripture says: "From the wilderness to Matanah" (Numbers 21:18), which can be read as: "From wilderness, a gift." (Sfat Emet).

רש"י על במדבר א':א

(א) וידבר. במדבר סיני באחד לחדש וגו'. מתוך חבבתו לפניו מונה אותם כל שעה — כשיצאו ממצרים מנאן, וכשנפלו בעגל מנאן לידע מנן הנותרים, כשבא להשרות שכונתו עליהם מנאם, באחד בניסן היום המשכן ובאחד באייר מנאם:

### Rashi on Numbers 1:1

(1) Because of His love for them, He counts them every now and then: when they went forth from

*Egypt He counted them (Exodus 12:37), when many of them fell in consequence of their having worshipped the golden calf He counted them to ascertain the number of those left; when he was about to make His Shechinah dwell amongst them, He again took their census; for on the first day of Nisan the Tabernacle was erected and shortly afterwards, on the first day of Iyar, He counted them.* What's the deal with all this counting? Counting is a process of ordering. Counting is organizing and shaping. Counting is imposition of frameworks and structure. And counting is protection and love.

במדבר א':ה

(ה) ואלה שמות האנשים אשר יעמדו אתכם לראובן אליצור בן־שדיאור:

### Numbers 1:5

(5) These are the names of the men who shall assist you: From Reuben, Elizur son of Shedeur.

The book of BEMIDBAR, Numbers, is a book of names, SHMOT. And the book of Names, SHMOT, is a book of numbers. Discuss.

במדבר א':כ"א

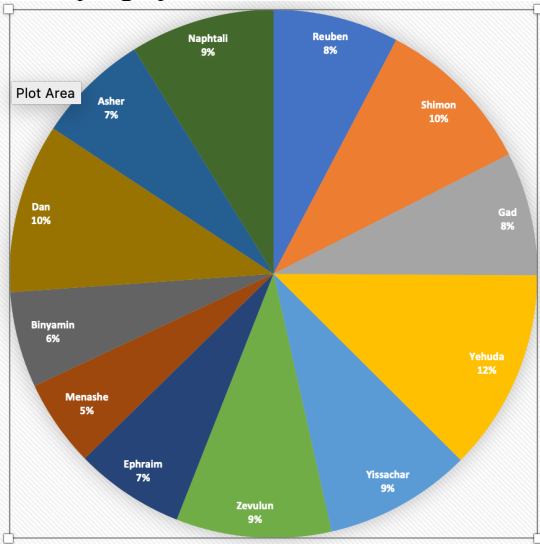
(כ) ויהיו בני־ראובן בכר ישראל תולדתם למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר שמות לגלגלתם כל־זכר מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְעֹלָה לְכָל יֵצֵא צֶבֶא: (כא) פְּרֻדֵיהֶם לְמִטָּה רְאוּבֵן שֵׁשָׁה וָאֶרְבָּעִים אֶלֶף וְחֲמִשׁ מֵאוֹת: (כ)

### Numbers 1:20-21

(20) They totaled as follows: The descendants of Reuben, Israel's first-born, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, head by head, all males aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms— (21) those enrolled from the tribe of Reuben: 46,500. And we go on from here for a column of parchment listing all the populations of the tribes. Numerals are not present in biblical texts. Indeed, the entire way that we display quantitative information is quite novel in human history. What if the Torah conveyed the populations of Israel in a chart like this?

Reuben	46,500	Ephraim	40,500
Shimon	59,300	Menashe	32,200
Gad	45,650	Binyamin	35,400
Yehuda	74,600	Dan	62,700
Yissachar	54,400	Asher	41,500
Zevulun	57,400	Naphtali	53,400

Or in a pie graph like this?



Visual display has utility to communicate information efficiently. The function of Text - chanted, memorized, recited, is narrative, is to convey information socially. The visual leads to individuation; textual leads to community. And, there are other messages too. Note that all of the tribal populations are chanted essentially with the same trope. Each tribe gets its own verse in the national song, sung to the same melody.

במדבר א':מ"ו

(מו) וַיְהִי כִּלְהַפְקֹדִים שְׁש־מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף וּשְׁלֹשַׁת אֲלָפִים וַחֲמִשָּׁן מֵאוֹת וַחֲמִשִּׁים:

**Numbers 1:46**

(46) all who were enrolled came to 603,550. This number is quite large. It is only the number of males above 20. What that meant in terms of the total population is anyone's guess. Some have suggested that the population of the entire people was around 2.5 million. That would be quite large and has raised many questions among scholars. Is the number real, symbolic, are we interpreting the words correctly? Is this a retrojection from a later period? All good questions.

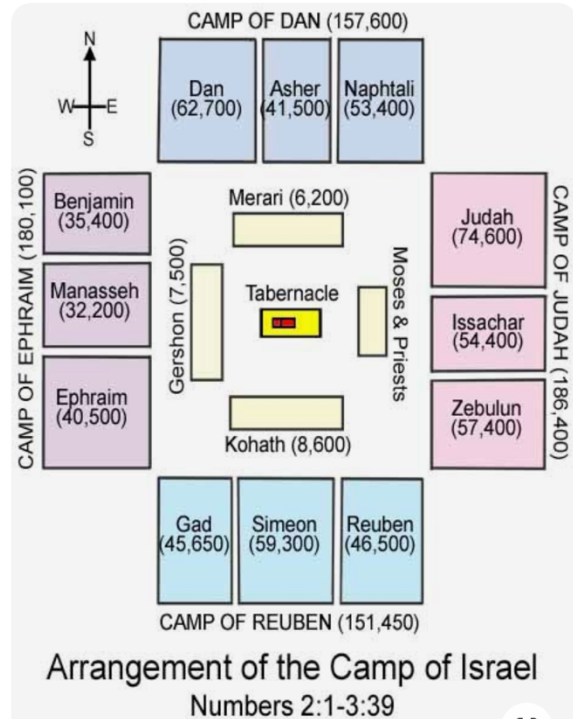
במדבר ב':ב'

(ב) אִישׁ עַל־דִּגְלוֹ בְּאֵתֶּת לִבֵּית אָבוֹתָם יִחַנּוּ בְּגִי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִלֶּבֶד סָבִיב לְאַהֲל־מוֹעֵד יִחַנּוּ:

**Numbers 2:2**

(2) The Israelites shall camp each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house; they shall camp around the Tent of Meeting at a distance. The array of the Israelites

itself could be presented visually:



It is one thing to visualize camping around the Tabernacle. It is another thing to sing about it.

במדבר ג':י"ב-י"ג

(יב) וְאַנֹכִי הִנֵּה לְקַחְתִּי אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תַּחַת כָּל־בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיוּ לִי הַלְוִיִּם: (יג) כִּי לֹא כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּיוֹם הַכֹּלֵל קָל־בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הִקְדַּשְׁתִּי לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאָדָם עַד־בְּהֵמָה לִי יִהְיוּ אֲנִי ה': (ס)

**Numbers 3:12-13**

(12) I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites in place of all the first-born, the first issue of the womb among the Israelites: the Levites shall be Mine. (13) For every first-born is Mine: at the time that I smote every first-born in the land of Egypt, I consecrated every first-born in Israel, man and beast, to Myself, to be Mine, the LORD's. The Levites are rewarded with their position in lieu of the firstborn because of their behavior at the Golden Calf episode. But there's probably something else going on here. Taking the first-born from every family disrupts the natural life of family and injures family continuity and function. Not to mention relationships. It is a very inefficient way of transmitting information: recruitment, organization and education as opposed to passing it down, father to son. The Levite system preserves the institution of the family and creates an efficient structure to serve the people. Shabbat Shalom!