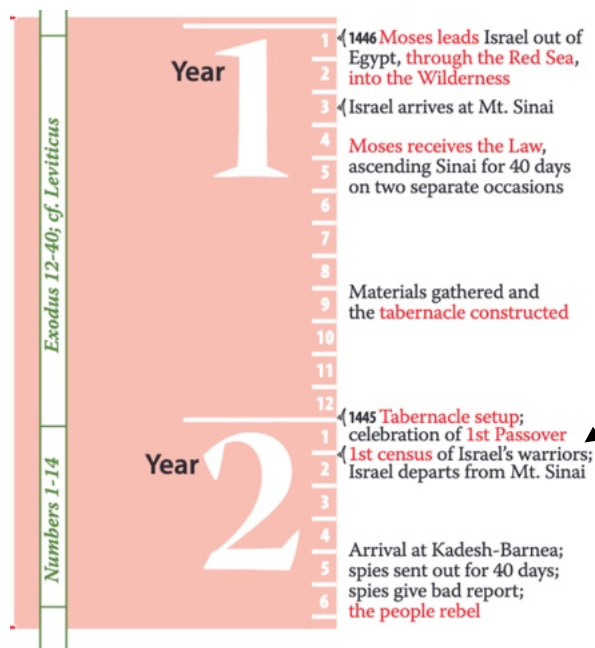


Some Comments on Parashat Bemidbar
Rabbi Eliot Malomet June 4, 2022 5 Sivan 5782

Welcome to the fourth book of the Torah, Bemidbar. Let's take a moment to figure out where we are geographically and chronologically. Geographically, we are in the desert. We have moved from Mount Sinai and are somewhere in the Sinai Desert — near Mount Sinai, also known as Mount Horeb.

Chronologically we are sometime in the second year since the Exodus. The Exodus Timeline:



In the chart on the left we can see that the Exodus took place in the first month of the first year, and that the revelation of the Ten Commandments took place a few months later.

במדבר א'א' וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינִי בְּאַהֲל מוֹעֵד בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁנִי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִית לְצֵאתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם לֵאמֹר: Numbers 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...

We are located now on the first of Iyyar in the second year, after the construction of the Tabernacle, after the anniversary of the Exodus. Recall that at the end of the Book of Exodus, the people are ready to march. It's important to recall that during the entire book of

Leviticus, there was no movement. Also, we are never given a "timestamp" of the various sets of rules that are issued in Leviticus. With the exception of the laws pertaining to the land at the end of the book, the entire rest of the book was spoken from the Tent of Meeting. In terms of time then we are still very close to the Sinai experience, the Golden Calf, the breaking of the tablets, the great skirmish, the second giving of the Ten Commandments. And the Exodus itself, together with its immediate aftermath, the splitting of the Red Sea, the war with Amalek is also still very fresh in the memory of the Israelites. As is their experiences of thirst and hunger. And even the experience of the last weeks of slavery is still present with them. In anticipation of what is to come, namely, the entry into the Land of Israel, this book begins. The people then have experienced incredible high's and unbearable low's, and are ready to begin their next chapter.

Introduction to Bemidbar by Chaim ben Yitzchok of Volozhin or The "Netziv" 1749 –1821.

This book Bemidbar is called Sefer HaPekudim (the Book of the Enumerations) by the Mishna in

the seventh chapter of tractate Yoma¹ and in other places,²... The theme of the two enumerations [stated] in this Book made a greater imprint on our Sages than any other of the many matters unique to this Book, the episode of the Spies

¹ Yoma 68b, when describing what the Kohen Gadol would read aloud from the Torah on Yom Kippur, states "... And the passage beginning, 'And on the

Tenth' that is in the Book of Pekudim (Num. 29:7-11), he recites by heart."

² Menachot 4:3 and Sotah 7:7

(Num. Chapters 13-14) or the blessing of Balaam (Num. 22:2 – 24:24) For [these enumerations] express the main theme of this Book, the transition and transformation in the worldly affairs of God's Nation from their living in the wilderness to when they entered the Land of Israel.

Comment: The Netziv focusses on an essential theme of the book: transition. Consider the state of the nation. When it left Egypt it was, at the very least organized by families, since the Passover meal was eaten together in families. When they leave Egypt, there is pandemonium but they organize themselves as families. Here they are about to enter the land (at least that is the plan; we know what happens...spoiler alert: they don't enter at this point!) For the Sages to call this book, *Sefer HaPekudim*, it must have meant that the enumerations that take place in this book, at the beginning when they are still fresh from Egypt, and at the end, when they are a new generation and the generation of the Exodus has died off, are the most important elements of the book. What is contained in the enumeration?

א:ב שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עֵדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם בְּמִסְפָּר שְׁמוֹת כָּל־זָכָר לְגִלְגָּלָתָם:

Take up the head-count of the community of the Children of Israel, by their clans, by their Fathers' Houses according to the number of names, every male per capita... Leaving aside the question of counting males vs. counting everyone, we can offer the following observation: counting people is a process in which individual identity is effectively erased. The purpose of doing that is to create a collective identity. Here the purpose of counting is to create a fighting unit. There is an awareness that in entering the land the people are most likely going to have to engage in combat. Armies are collective identities. And yet here, the people are still to possess an identity beyond just being individual elements of a collective. They are to be counted based on their *clans* and their *Father's Houses* meaning that the basic element of their identity will remain intact, despite being formed into a larger group. As we have seen many times, the *family* is one of the great animating themes of the Torah. From the beginning of Bereishit, as humanity is organized in families, through the Exodus, when the people re-create themselves as

a people on the basis of a family meal, to this point, when the fighting units are enumerated on the basis of family, the Torah is always projecting the idea of the *family* into the consciousness of Israel. That of course has remained essential to Judaism.

ב:א-ב: וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: אִישׁ עַל־דִּגְלוֹ בְּאַתֶּת לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם יִחַנוּ בָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִקֵּד סָבִיב לְאֹהֶל־מוֹעֵד יִחַנוּ:

2:1-2 *The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: Each by its contingent, under the insignias of their Fathers' House, are the Children of Israel to encamp, at a distance, around the Tent of Appointment, they are to encamp.* The tribes are to encamp themselves surrounding the sanctuary which is an obvious statement about the centrality of God's presence to the people as they embark on their journey through the desert.

Rashi:

(ב) באותות – כל דגל יהיה לו אות מפה צבועה תלויה בו, צבעו של זה לא כצבעו של זה, צבע כל אחד כגוון אבנו הקבועה בחשן, ומתוך כך כל אחד יכיר את דגלו. ומהם למדה המלכות להיות עושים מפאות צבועות בדגליהם, תנחומא (תנחומא במדבר י"ב).

Each banner shall have a different sign — a piece of colored cloth hanging on it, the color of the one not being the same as the color of another, but the color of each tribe shall be like that of his stone that is fixed in the breastplate (of Exodus 28:21),

and by this means everybody will be able to recognize his banner. What a fascinating comment!

This would be a vexillologist's dream, to depict the flags. But wait, it has already been done. Philatelists of Israeli stamps already know



the images based on this comment by Rashi. These were among the first series of definitive stamps issued by Israel. Issued in 1955/1956 they were in circulation for many years. Each color is the color of the tribe's stone on the breastplate. Balancing a collective identity with individual tribal identities is one of the key themes of biblical Israel. Some would argue, modern Israel as well. Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem!

