

A lot has happened in the twelve-and-a-half months since the people left Egypt. According to the plan, after being freed from bondage, receiving the Torah, and creating their mobile sanctuary, the Children of Israel were now supposed to make their way to the Promised Land. Having already encountered a ruthless adversary and knowing that they were likely to encounter resistance as they journeyed to the land, they needed an army. But in order to create an army you need numbers.

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי בְּאַחַד מוֹעֲד בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי
בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִית לְצֵאתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר: שָׂאוּ אֵת רֹאשׁ כָּל עַדְת
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם בְּמִסְפַּר שְׂמוֹת כָּל זָכָר
לְגִלְגָּלָתָם. מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְנֹמְעֵלָה כָּל יֵצֵא צָבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל תִּפְקְדוּ
אֹתָם לְצִבְיָתָם אֹתָם וְאֶהְרֹן. וְאַתֶּם יְהִיוּ אִישׁ אִישׁ לְמִשְׁתָּה אִישׁ רֹאשׁ
לְבֵית אֲבֹתָיו הוּא. (במדבר א:א-ד)

*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: Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the **clans of its fathers' houses**, - a listing the names, every male, head by head. You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms. Associated with you shall be a man from each tribe, each one the head of his fathers' house. (Num. 1:1-4)*

We cannot help but notice the repetition of the syllable **תם** **TUM** in this string of verses. **לְצִבְיָתָם**, **לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם**, **לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם**, **לְגִלְגָּלָתָם**, **לְצִבְיָתָם**, **תִּפְקְדוּ** **אֹתָם**. Not to beat this point, but the repetition of this percussive syllable, drums into our ears that we are about to set out on a march. The beat gets amplified further down in the chapter with the addition of another **תם-TUM** word - **תולדותם** - creating the percussive phrase: **תולדותם** ⇔ **toldoTUM** - **לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם** - **lemishpehoTUM** - **leveit avoTUM** a phrase that is repeated no less than twelve times. Here is the first instance of this phrase in the census of the tribe of Reuben:

וַיְהִיו בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל
תולדותם לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם (במ' א:כ)

*The children of Reuben, first born of Israel
toldoTUM lemishpehoTUM leveit avoTUM. (Num. 1:20)*

The repetition of this phrase creates a poetic rhythm. It also invites curiosity: What does it mean? How should we translate it? And why does the Torah use all these words to list the numbers of the able-bodied military-age men this way? Why not just state the grand total at once? Why all these groups and categories? Is there a story here? To answer these questions, we need to examine each of the terms closely.

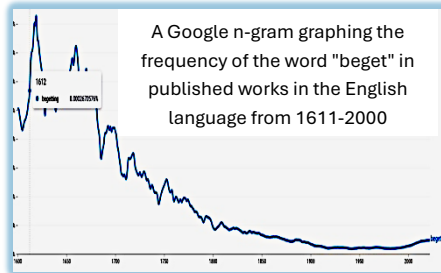
תולדותם-toldotam comes from **תולדות-toldot** a word that is familiar to us from its frequent appearance in Genesis (11 times). A typical example occurs in the opening of the story of Noah:

אֵלֶּה תולדות נח נח איש צדיק תמים היה בדורתי. (בר' ו:ט)

These are the toldot of Noah, Noah was a righteous, wholehearted man in his generation. (Gen. 6:9).

There are many English renderings of **toldot** which only demonstrates that **translating toldot is troublesome!** Typically, traditional translators opt for **begetting**. Everett Fox:

these are the begettings of Noah. But **begetting** is archaic. Nobody **begets** anymore. If the parent of a newborn said, *I begot my child* we would roll our eyes at their ostentatious biblicality. **Begetting** was begotten by the English language in the 16th century and betakes its popularity from the broad appeal of the King James Bible. And because the word **getting**



is embedded in **begetting**, to **beget** sounds more like an acquisition, like say a bag of groceries, as opposed to say, a bundle of joy. We might opt for the more precise

birthings of Noah but that obviously does not work because Noah's wife did all the birthing. Robert Alter opted for: *This is the lineage of Noah* ditching any allusion to fathering, birthing, or any other act contributing genetic material. What Alter lacks in precision, he makes up for in simplicity. Indeed, in almost every instance, **תולדת** introduces a lineage, to wit, **a list of descendants**. For example, the **תולדת-list** that occurs at the end of the Book of Ruth (which we will read in a couple of days):

וְאֵלֶּה תולדות פֶּרֶץ: פֶּרֶץ הוליד אֶת הֶעָרֹן. וְהֶעָרֹן הוליד אֶת רֵם. וְרֵם הוליד אֶת עֲמִינָדָב. וְעֲמִינָדָב הוליד אֶת נַחֲשֹׁן. וְנַחֲשֹׁן הוליד אֶת שִׁלְמָה. וְשִׁלְמוֹן הוליד אֶת בְּעֹז. וְבְעֹז הוליד אֶת עֹבֵד. וְעֹבֵד הוליד אֶת יֵשׁוּ. וְיֵשׁוּ הוליד אֶת דָּוִד. (רות ד:יח-כב)

This is the toldot of Perez: Perez begot Hezron, Hezron begot Ram. Ram begot Amminadab. Amminadab begot Nahshon. Nahshon begot Salmon. Salmon begot Boaz. Boaz begot Obed. Obed begot Jesse. And Jesse begot David. (Ruth 4:18-22)

Toldot therefore is simply a list of descendants.

משפחה-mishpehotam comes from **משפחה-family**. Plural: **משפחות-families**. But what constitutes a **family**? Are we to understand **family** in the narrowest sense, the traditional nuclear family - father, mother, children - or in the broader sense - parents, children, grandparents, grandchildren, great-grandparents, great-grandchildren and all the spouses who marry in, and so on? In modern Hebrew, **משפחה** denotes the sense of kinship that complete strangers have with one another. In Yiddish, **mishpoche** gives us an added layer of **heimishness** and intimacy. In the Torah, ironically, the first instance of **משפחה** refers to groupings of animals, not humans! When Noah leaves the ark it says:

וַיֵּצֵא נֹחַ וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְנִשְׁי בָנָיו אִתּוֹ. (בר' ח:יח)

*Noah and his sons went out,
his wife and his sons' wives with him. (Gen. 8:18)*

Notice that the Noahide couples are not properly coupled in their marital units. The males and females disembark the ark in separate groups. But in the very next line, we get a report of the disembarkation of the animals:

כָּל הַחַיָּה כָּל הָרֶמֶשׂ וְכָל הָעוֹף כָּל רֶמֶשׂ עַל הָאָרֶץ לְמִשְׁפַּחְתֵּיהֶם יָצְאוּ
מִן הַתֵּבָה. (בר' ח:יט)

all the animals, all the crawlers, and all birds, all that crawl about on the earth, went out of the ark according to their **mishpehot** (!). (Gen. 8:19)

All the humans entered the ark as pairs and left the ark as individuals, without offspring. But the animals went in as pairs and went out **למשפחתיהם**-according to their **mishpehot** i.e. with offspring! Draw your own conclusions. The animals "got busy" on the ark and became clans, but the humans (understandably) did not. But fast forward to two other examples of **משפחה** in Genesis: 1) The Table of Nations:

מִצְלָה נִפְרְדוּ אֲנִי הַגּוֹיִם בְּאַרְצֵתָם אִישׁ לְלִשְׁנוֹ לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם בְּגוֹיָהֶם. (בר' י:ה)

From these (the sons and grandsons of Yaphet, Noah's youngest son) the Sea Peoples were divided by their lands, each with his own tongue: according to their **mishpehot**, in their nations. (Gen. 10:5)

2) God's blessing to Abraham:

וְנִבְרַכְנוּ בְךָ כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה. (בר' י:ה)

Through you all the **mishpehot** of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:3)

In all of these cases, **משפחה** is clearly not the nuclear family. It is a much larger familial unit, namely a clan, to wit, a multigenerational family consisting of several branches of siblings and cousins, their spouses and offspring, numbering possibly in the hundreds or thousands.

בית אבותם-**beit avotam**. Literally, **the house of their fathers**, the common ancestor of all of the clans, but not the father of the nation. Here is an example of this genealogical taxonomy:

אֵלֶּה	These (i.e. this list of sons of Jacob,
רְאִשֵּׁי	which become tribes) are the households
בֵּית אֲבוֹתָם	of the fathers: (The first "household of
	father" in this list is)
בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן	the sons of Reuben,
בְּכֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל	first-born of Israel (which consists of the
חֲנוּךְ וּפְלֹאֵז	following four mishpehot -clans):
חֲזָרֹן וְכַרְמִי	Hanokh, Palu, Hetzron, Karmi.
אֵלֶּה	These (four mishpehot -clans)
מִשְׁפַּחַת רְאוּבֵן.	are the clans of Reuben. (Exod. 6:14)

That text continues with Simeon, the second **household of a father** and then Levi, the third son of Jacob, and the third **Beit Av-Household of Father** within the nation, to which Moses and Aaron belong. It follows from this that a **Beit Av-Household of Father** is simply another term for what we commonly refer to as a tribe.¹ How then should we understand the dozen-repeated percussive phrase: **toldotam lemishpehotam leveit avotam**? We will go back to Reuben:

וַיְהִיו בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן	The [number of] descendants of Reuben,
בְּכֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל	Israel's first-born, [were totaled].
תּוֹלְדֹתָם	[All] the lists of descendants
לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם	[were organized] by the clans

¹ Another example from Lekh Lekha. God says to Abraham, **Go forth from your land, your birthplace and beit-avikha**. We normally interpret that as his father, Terah's household. But could it possibly be referring to a larger tribal unit? If so, Abraham's migration is a rupture of ethnic identity and not direct paternal identity. Notice also that when Abraham dispatches his servant to find a wife for Isaac, he sends him **to my land and my birthplace**

לְבֵית אֲבוֹתָם	[to which they belonged] [which were in turn] part of [the larger] tribes.
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A census is complicated. According to the US Constitution everyone must be counted every ten years. Questionnaires are mailed and fieldworkers are dispatched. **It's a huge logistical undertaking that relies on pre-existing organizational infrastructure, which consists of municipal address lists and the postal system. Likewise, the Israelite census relied on the pre-existing organizational infrastructure of the Children of Israel, namely their multi-generational clans, which comprised of each Father's Household or tribe.** The **toldot-lists** of names of all the males above the age of 20 were collected by clan. These were tallied and brought to each tribal representative who added up all the tallies of the clans to arrive at a total for each tribe/ancestral household. The totals of the able-bodied fighting-age men of the tribes were then added together for the grand total for the whole people. **As they were building an army, all they had to work with was their basic individual/family/clan/tribe infrastructure. We can speculate then that this is a snapshot in Israelite military history.** Much like the US Army began with local and state militias, the Israelite army began with clan and tribal militias. On a functional level, that made perfect sense. The natural bonds of kith and kin would have made the organization of the fighting force relatively easy. Men who grew up with each other would have little difficulty bonding together and risking their lives to protect each other, because of the strong pre-existing family bonds. But one can also imagine that that kind of clan-based organization could have had catastrophic consequences for the clan in the event of many casualties. Entire clans would have been left with no men. That happened during the Civil War. Because of localized recruitment and regimentation, entire communities were devastated when battles went awry and casualties were high. For example, when the 1st Minnesota Volunteer Infantry lost 215 out of its 262 men at Gettysburg (an 82% casualty rate) it was a disaster for the home front and the effects were felt for generations. **The census of Israel is part of a larger story. With its percussive emphasis on the pre-existing family structure, we witness the transition of the newly freed clans of slaves into a tribal league of free people, ready to defend itself in the present, and secure its land in the future. Shabbat Shalom!**

We continue to pray for the return of the hostages on the 603rd day of their captivity in Gaza. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, heal the wounded and shield Israel from continued Houthi missile terror. Amen!

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Lisa and Hazzan Mike Weis to commemorate the Yahrzeits of Lisa's mother, Natalie Tannenbaum, z'l.

(Gen. 24:4). But when the servant tells his story to Lavan he says that Abraham told him to go **to my father's household/my ancestral tribe and my mishpaha/clan** (24:38). For Abraham it was enough to go back to find a wife from the larger geographic region of his origin. **But for the wise servant interacting with members of Abraham's clan, it was important to emphasize to them that Abraham really wanted him to find a wife for his son from his, Abraham's same tribe and same clan.**