



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB  
OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

## How Is Bamidbar Relevant Today?

Although the rest of the world refers to the Five Books of Moses as the Pentateuch, traditional Jews refer to it as the *Chumash*, stressing that it is comprised of five very different sections. The themes of each book differ fundamentally from each other. Genesis, *Bereshit*, deals with the creation of the world and its early history and the formation of the family that became the nation of Israel. Exodus, *Shemot*, describes our period of slavery in Egypt, our redemption from that slavery, the revelation on Mount Sinai, and the construction of the Tabernacle in the desert. Leviticus, *Vayikra*, is concerned mainly with the sacrificial rituals and the duties of the priests, the *kohanim*. Deuteronomy, *Devarim*, is a summary and review—in some sense a preview—of Jewish history.

But what is the Book of Numbers, *Bamidbar*, all about? Moreover, and this question has been raised by commentators throughout the ages, in what way is the Book of

Numbers relevant to us today? Essentially, besides describing the census of the Jewish people taken in the desert, it relates various narratives about events that occurred in the desert. Only minimally are commandments, *mitzvot*, issued in this fourth book of the Torah, and most of these are *mitzvot* that are no longer applicable. What eternal message is contained in *Sefer Bamidbar*, the Book of Numbers?

These questions are intensified by the remarks of the great medieval commentator Ramban in his introduction to *Sefer Bamidbar*. These are his words:

Now this whole book deals only with those commandments which were meant for a particular time, the period when the Israelites stayed in the desert, and with the miracles which were done for them... It tells how He began to destroy their enemies before them by the sword, and He also commanded how the Land should be divided up amongst them. There are no commandments in this book which are binding for all times except for some commandments about the offerings which He had begun in the Book of Leviticus, and whose explanation was not completed there; therefore, He finished them in this book.

Ramban's words attest to the temporary nature of the book which we begin to read this Shabbat. He stresses that "these

commandments were meant only for a particular time,” only *lesha’ah*, for the moment, and not for future generations. What are we to make of such a book? Why does it comprise a fifth of our Written Torah?

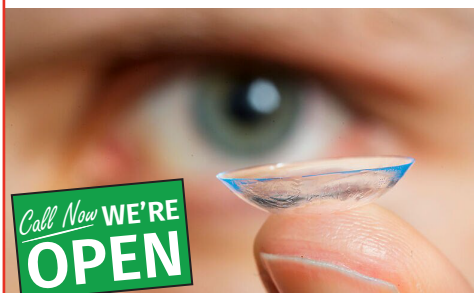
The nineteenth century Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the *Netziv*, views the desert narratives of *Sefer Bamidbar* in a manner which only adds to our perplexity. In his introduction to our book, he insists that it is mainly concerned with a period of time in which we were led by direct divine guidance and protected by supernatural interventions. Once we left the wilderness and entered the Land of Israel, we transitioned into a different reality, a natural reality, one in which direct divine guidance and supernatural interventions were no longer available.

Now our question takes on a metaphysical aspect. Of what benefit to us is a book which describes a reality totally different from the one we inhabit today?

It should be noted that Ramban’s contention that “there are no commandments in this book which are binding for all times” was modestly challenged by the late fifteenth century commentator and statesman Don Isaac Abarbanel. He conceded that “there are several commandments in this book which are mentioned incidentally, *agav gerara*, which are directed toward future generations.”

However, it was the late eighteenth century Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz, author of *Panim Yafot*, who challenged Ramban’s contention much more forcefully. Quoting one of his distinguished predecessors, he writes,

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“I’m puzzled. In this book, we do indeed find many *mitzvot* which are applicable to all generations and are not limited to the Tabernacle rituals. They include the *mitzvah* to confess one’s sins, the *mitzvah* of the *Birkat Kohanim*, the requirement of *challah*, the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*, the *mitzvot* of not being led astray by our hearts and by our eyes, the *mitzvah* of redeeming the firstborn, the laws of inheritance, the laws of nullification of vows, and, perhaps above all, the *mitzvah* of sounding the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah.”

Long ago, I discovered that when I confront such difficulties in my Torah study, I am best advised to search the interpretive literature for some entirely different approach. I look for a commentary which reframes the problem in some novel and creative manner. I have compiled my own informal “short list” of such commentaries, most of which are of relatively recent composition. One of them is the collection of insights of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of blessed memory, entitled *HaMaor ShebaTorah*. There, I found two approaches to our problem which appealed to me.

His first approach is based upon the title

of our book, *Bamidbar*, “In the Desert,” or, perhaps better, “In the Wilderness.” The Rebbe understands the entire Pentateuch as a description of the preparation of a *dirah batachtonim*, a “dwelling place” for the Almighty in this human world. The first three books of the Torah focus upon the internal process that the Jewish people must undergo to create an “inner” dwelling place for the Almighty. The fourth book, our book, is a description of the beginning of an outward process aimed toward the rest of humanity. The *midbar*, wilderness, represents the arena in which the Jewish people confront the outside world, the *olam hachitzoni*.

The Rebbe thus uses the metaphor of the wilderness to represent the challenge to the Jewish people to fashion a “dwelling place” for the Almighty among all the human race. This metaphor was employed by the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 20 verse 35, which reads, “And I will bring you into the wilderness of the nations, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face.”

The Rebbe maintains that the theme of *Sefer Bamidbar* is the mission of the Jewish people to establish a “dwelling place” for the Almighty among all the people on

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Earth. This approach certainly makes our book relevant today.

The Rebbe continues to offer yet a second approach to our problem. Although most of us call it *Sefer Bamidbar*, our Sages refer to our book as *Sefer HaPikudim*, “Book of Countings,” similar to the general public’s “Book of Numbers.” He questions the fact that our Torah attributes such significance to mere numbers. After all, does quantity have spiritual importance? Is not quality what really matters from a spiritual perspective?

To answer these questions, the Rebbe suggests that the lesson of the Book of Numbers is just this: numbers do matter. Quantity does lead to quality even in the spiritual sphere. After all, he argues, prayer requires a *minyán*, a quorum of ten men. *Birkat HaMazon* requires three for a *zimun*. And a special blessing is recited when 600,000 Jews are in one’s view.

I would add the words of Rashi in last week’s Torah portion (Leviticus 26:8): “A small number of people upholding the Torah cannot compare to a large number of people who do so.”

The theme of the Book of Numbers is simply this: Numbers do matter. Quantity impacts quality.

Thus, we can begin this new section of the Five Books of Moses conscious of two major themes: (1) As Jews, we have a mission to the nations to help make the world a “dwelling place” for the Almighty, and (2) just as “the more the merrier,” so too, “the more the holier.” ■



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