



ALIYA-BY-ALIYA SEDRA SUMMARY

RABBI REUVEN TRADBURKS
RCA ISRAEL REGION

PARSHAT BEMIDBAR

Sefer Bemidbar is the march to the Land of Israel. The central story of the entire Torah is the promise to the Jewish people of the Land of Israel and the journey to make that happen.

The Promise of the Land was made to Avraham. And Yitzchak. And Yaakov. Moshe was told at the burning bush that G-d would take the people out of Egypt because of the promise He made. To give them the Land of Israel. That has been the goal from the time of Avraham. The overlay narrative of the entire Torah is the promise of the Land and the march to it. There are plenty of other themes along the way, but that is the grand plan, the march to the Land.

Now we know that it is going to take 40 years to get there. But we need to read the Torah trying hard to stay in real time as the story unfolds. And as the story is unfolding, as far as the people know they will enter the Land of Israel imminently.

Bemidbar is the dawn of the march to the

Land and as such the Torah changes dramatically. Since Mt. Sinai, the focus of the Torah has been the encounter of G-d and man. Because the society we are going to build in the Land will have the encounter of G-d at its core. We built the Mishkan as a place to rendezvous. The book of Vayikra outlined how we approach Him and when we may not approach Him. And that the approach to G-d occurs not only in the drama of the Mishkan but in the holiness of our daily life as well. All of that is to describe the type of society we are to build in the Land.

Now, the entire narrative changes. No more talking about the society in the Land. Now we need to make it happen. We are pivoting from holiness to, well, earthiness. Marching. Conquering. Dividing the Land. Moving from the rarified air of pursuing holiness to the messy business of a national aspiration of taking the Land.



1ST ALIYA (BEMIDBAR 1:1-19)

On Rosh Chodesh Iyar of the second year since leaving Egypt, Moshe and Aharon are to take a census of all men over the age of 20. The leaders of each tribe are to assist. These leaders are named. Moshe, Aharon and the leaders gather the people who establish to which tribe each person belongs.

The census is to be conducted by tribe. The leader of the tribe conducts the census. The names of the leaders of each tribe are listed.

The census numbers are striking. The book of Shemot began with just 70 Jewish people. And now, 600,000! My how things

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can change.



2ND ALIYA (1:20-54)

The census, by tribe, of all men over the age of 20, the age of army service is presented. The tribe of Reuven: 46,500. Shimon: 59,300. Gad: 46,500. Yehuda: 74,600. Yissachar: 54,400. Zevulun: 57,400. Ephraim: 40,500. Menashe: 32,200. Binyamin: 35,400. Dan: 62,700. Asher: 41,500. Naftali: 53,400. The total of this census done by Moshe and Aharon and the 12 leaders of the tribes was 603,550. However, the tribe of Levi is not included. They are to safeguard the Mishkan: camping around the Mishkan, transporting it, dismantling and assembling it. The tribes camp in distinct groups, while the Leviim encamp around the Mishkan.

The census is taken by tribes. The numbers vary. That too is striking. They all started from the same spot. One person. And they vary. Oh how similar beginnings can bear wildly different results.

The emphasis on tribes, or shevatim, is new. Up until now, the Jew has functioned in 2 realms; individual and Am Yisrael, the Jewish people. We have mitzvot for the individual. And we have mitzvot for the people, like the daily offering. It is for the Jewish people.

But why is there a notion of tribe? Why identify in 3 ways, as individual, as tribe and as a people? It is somewhat akin to: I am a Jew, I am an Israeli, and I am a Yerushalmi. While that is true, what does it convey?

And this theme of tribal affiliation will animate much of the book. We camp as a tribe. The Land of Israel will be divided by tribe. If land is sold in the Land of Israel, it reverts back to its original owner in Yovel, in order to maintain tribal integrity. The tribe is like a state within the nation, a province within

a country.

Now, we in these parts of the world are familiar with large family units, hamulas in the parlance.

But perhaps the persistence in maintaining tribal units is an introduction to diversity. In the pivot from holiness to the reality of the march to the Land, we also move from what we all share, holiness, to how we are different. We are different due to our genetics, our upbringing, the influence of our surroundings.

And in the march to the Land, this diversity will be challenging. There will be disputes and disagreements. I don't think it is an overstatement to say that diversity is the single biggest challenge to mankind. Managing differences is terribly difficult. Things would be a lot simpler if we were all the same. And bland. Diversity brings color to life but that color comes at a cost.

This book of Bemidbar will be preoccupied with diversity and the challenges that it brings.



3RD ALIYA (2:1-34)

The tribes are to camp in a designated manner. For each of the tribes the name of their Nasi, the number of their tribe and the place in the formation is given. On the east side, the front, are Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun. Their combined number is 186,400. On the south side are Reuven, Shimon and Gad. Their combined number is 151,450. The Ohel Moed, surrounded by Levi, both camps and travels in the middle. On the west side are Ephraim, Menashe and Binyamin. Their combined number is 108,100. On the north side are Dan, Asher and Naftali. Their combined number is 157,600. The total count of the army age men is 603,550 without the tribe of Levi.

The people travel and camp with the Mishkan in their midst. Physically and metaphorically. We travel through history with G-d in our midst. The distinct feeling you get in the detailed description of where each tribe encamped is the feeling of an army encampment. But with the Mishkan in the middle.



4TH ALIYA (3:1-13)

Aharon's sons' names were Nadav, Avihu, Elazar and Itamar. Nadav and Avihu died without children. Elazar and Itamar serve as kohanim with Aharon. Take the Leviim: they are to serve Aharon. The Leviim are responsible for the Mishkan: to support the kohanim and the people, to facilitate the running of the Mishkan. The Leviim shall take the place of the first-born, who became obligated to me when saved in Egypt.

There are 2 groups mentioned here: Kohanim and Leviim. The lineage of the kohanim is given. It just doesn't take much room. Because Aharon is a kohen and his sons are. And he only has 2. So the entire lineage of the kohanim is 3 people. The Leviim, on the other hand, are an entire tribe, descendants of Levi, son of Yaakov. Their lineage, at quite some length, is given in the next aliya.



5TH ALIYA (3:14-39)

Count the tribe of Levi by households, from 1 month and older: the households of Gershon, Kehat and Merari, the sons of Levi. The sons of Gershon, Kehat and Merari are listed. Gershon's family, from a month and above, is 7,500. They camp to the west of the Mishkan. Their task was to transport and be responsible for the curtains and coverings. Kehat numbered 8,600, camping to the south. They were responsible for the vessels: Aron, Menorah, Table, altars. Merari numbered 6,200, camping to the north.

Responsible for the structure of the Mishkan; the walls, supports and beams. The total of the tribe of Levi is 22,000. On the front side, east of the Mishkan, Moshe and Aharon and families camped.

The encampment around the Mishkan had 2 layers. The Leviim were in close, on 3 of the 4 sides of the Mishkan. The 4th side, the leading side, had Moshe and Aharon. The entire 12 tribes were farther removed on all 4 sides.

The 3 sons of Levi were family groups; Gershon, Kehat and Merari. They had full responsibility for the Mishkan. Their tasks fell in categories. Gershon; textiles. Kehat; furniture. Merari; building. Gershon took care of the curtains and coverings. Kehat, the important main vessels of the Mishkan. And Merari the structure of the building.



6TH ALIYA (3:40-51)

Count all the firstborn of the age of a month and above. The Leviim are to replace the firstborn. There were 273 more firstborn than Leviim; these were redeemed.

The firstborn are replaced as public servants by the Leviim. The notion that the firstborn shall be the public servants has great appeal; every home becomes infused with public service by virtue of the firstborn dedicated to holy work.

But, as appealing as that is, it is not implemented. The firstborn are switched off for the Leviim.

Perhaps because it would be an inequitable burden. The poor families rely on their firstborn to work, to be the first to contribute to the family wellbeing. The replacement of the firstborn by the Leviim may be recognition of the inequity that would inevitably result in requiring the firstborn of every family to leave their home for public service.



7TH ALIYA (4:1-20)

Take from Kehat all men from the age of 30 to 50 to do their work of the holy of holies. But since Kehat was to carry the vessels of the Mishkan, Aharon and his sons covered each vessel to prevent Kehat from touching them. The Aron was covered by: the Parochet (curtain), then leather, then techelet covering. The Shulchan: techelet, then the extra utensils, then red, then the tachash skin. Menorah: techelet, then tachash. Incense altar: techelet, then tachash. Outer altar: purple, then tachash. In this way, calamity will not befall Kehat in transporting the holy things.

The Torah describes how the different parts of the Mishkan are to be wrapped for transport. Because the Leviim are not to touch these holy vessels.

We have encountered this theme before. Holiness is desirable, it is our goal. But handle with care. Too close is dangerous.

Closeness to the Divine, as symbolized by these vessels, has to be tempered. We want to encounter the Divine. But we need to keep our distance. Perhaps to emphasize that while our deepest desire is to encounter the Divine, we need to be aware of the Mystery, the Infinite, the incomprehensible. Mind the gap.

Special Haftarah is read of Machar Chodesh (Shmuel Alef, chapter 20)

HAFTARAH 1 SHMUEL 20:18-42

Today's *haftarah* is read on a Shabbat that is immediately followed by Rosh Chodesh. The reading opens with the words, "Yonatan said, 'Tomorrow is the [first of the] new month.'"

The story is one of loyalty and devotion. David and Yonatan are dear friends. Yonatan's father, King Shaul, despises David, fearing that he will depose him from the throne. Sensing danger, Yonatan told David to hide in the field rather than attend Shaul's Rosh Chodesh feast. Yonatan then attended the feast and gauged the king's mood. Realizing that Shaul was determined to kill David, Yonatan went out to the field, shot three arrows and called to his assistant, "The arrow is beyond you," a predetermined signal to his friend that it was not safe to return to the king's palace.

Before parting, the two friends kissed and wept, and swore to maintain their friendship for generations to come. ■



STATS

34th sedra of 54; first of 10 in Bamidbar. Written on 263 lines, ranks 3rd. 30 parshiyot; 23 open, 7 closed, 4th. 159 pesukim - rank 3 (3rd in Bamidbar). 1823 words - rank 13 (4th in Bamidbar). 7393 letters - rank 9 (3rd in Bamidbar).



MITZVOT

None of Taryag in Bamidbar - it is the largest of the 17 sedras without mitzvot.

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