



Unity despite diversity

Parashat bemidbar (34) – In the wilderness

Torah: *Bemidbar* 1:1 to 4:20

Haftarah: *Hoshēa* 1:10 to 2:23

Apostolic Scriptures: *Qorintiyim Aleph* 12:12-31

The fourth book of *the Torah* is known in English as Numbers, derived from the Latin and Greek names indicating that the first four chapters, as well as ch. 26, have to do with censuses – a command that *YAH* gives to *Mosheh* to determine their military strength. The Hebrew name, *Bemidbar*, is more appropriate, however, because the book describes almost 40 years in the wilderness. Compare this with the recently completed *Wayyiqra*, which describes about one month at Mount *Sinai*!

We can briefly review the outline of the book:

- 🥂 preparations to leave *Sinai* (1:1-10:10);
- 🥂 trip to *Qadēsh Barnēa* (10:11-12:16);
- 🥂 walks through the wilderness (13:2-20:21);
- 🥂 journey to *Mo'ab* (20:22-22:1);
- 🥂 on the plains of *Mo'ab* (22:2-36:13)

In a quick summary of *Bemidbar* we see that *YAH* is still keeping His promise to *Abraham*, in the midst of *Yisra'el's* apostasy and failure. He is going to bring them into the promised land, but there is one problem: the current inhabitants are a threat and the people see no chance to wage war against them (chs. 13 to 14). Most of the older generation is terrified, but the younger generation, which also includes two fearless men named *Yehoshua* and *Kalēb*, wants to seize the opportunity to move to their new land. This younger generation will later be led by *Yehoshua*, although the dilemma is not fully resolved in the narrative of this book. However, there is an expectation of the nation's future in the promised land (chs. 34 and others).

The book of *Bemidbar* is primarily a narrative of events and the journey from *Sinai* to *Mo'ab*, although certain literary contributions are included that supplement the narrative. The book contains much legal content, while an overarching part also deals with educational history with the aim of bringing knowledge of *Elohim*. The first book, *Berēshith*, has highlighted the meaning of trust very strongly, especially through the life of *Abraham*. The book of *Shemoth* shows that trust is explained by worship and obedience. The middle book, *Wayyiqra*, gives us excellent explanations about worship. Now, in the book of *Bemidbar*, we learn the importance of obedience by exposing the roots, course, and fruit of disobedience.

One year has passed since the people left *Mitsrayim*, a period in which they experienced various spiritual and physical obstacles. Even a year after their exodus, *Mitsrayim* is not yet out of the people. They accepted the covenant of *YAH* and received the *Torah*; they built the tabernacle and learned how to offer sacrifices; priests were appointed and now the next step is about to happen: they must learn the relationship between freedom and discipline in order to maintain an orderly society. So we will learn in *Bemidbar* how important discipline and order are to *YAH*, something that each of us can take seriously.

YAH disciplines the people for their disobedience, but He always makes them aware of the purpose for which they have been set apart. The years in the wilderness are rightly a time of education, rather than rejection, just as *Mosheh* was prepared for 40 years in another wilderness to become a leader of the nation. *Yeshua* was prepared for 40 days in the wilderness during his temptation before he officially began his ministry:

Marqos 1 ¹²And immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness. ¹³And He was there in the wilderness forty days, tried by Satan, and was with the wild beasts. And the messengers attended Him.

No one on earth becomes a leader overnight. No person on earth suddenly gets a valid educational qualification without the necessary education. We, as followers of *Yeshua* on the Way of Truth, must also be tested to make sure that we are not here only for the pleasure ride. Someone who professes to walk this way and has never been tested is lying through their teeth – one way or the other. The people are in the wilderness to be tested corporately and individually and later we will examine cases to find out why wrong actions and also transgressions were sometimes made.

Mosheh is instructed by *YAH* to count the people according to their tribes. Each tribe obviously has strong family ties and this is exactly how *YAH* wants them to relate to each other. There is nothing stronger than family ties, but unfortunately they are sometimes also some of the most difficult relationships in the life of a believer. Many people relate to friends rather than family, because if the friendship goes south, it is simply ended and a new one is formed. In the case of family it is not so easy, therefore *YAH* teaches us that our first responsibility lies with our family.

Every one of us who has undergone military training, or the ladies who are married to such a person, knows that it is possibly the most enjoyable time of your life that you never want to experience again! The reason for this is the discipline that is applied there. However, if we were to be honest with ourselves, everyone will admit that it was an extremely necessary part of our lives and should be applied again for every school leaver. So when *Mosheh* begins to count people, he does so in an orderly manner, as *YAH* teaches him. Every man who is fit for war is counted and the people would move through the wilderness in a specific order, irrespective of war or no war, to the promised land.

YAH teaches *Mosheh* to look for three things when counting the men:

- ☞ according to their families, according to their fathers' houses. This would mean that they were faithful to their families and did not intermarry or mix with people from *Mitsrayim* or any other foreigners who would be in the land.
- ☞ according to the number of names. From this we learn that they remained faithful to their people and did not adopt foreign names.
- ☞ The fact that each person's name was preserved also teaches us that they preserved their language and did not allow mixing with other languages.

To this day, *Mitsrayim* symbolises the evil system of this world, but we learn from the nation's history that even a foreign culture and slavery did not make them abandon their original values. We may be in this evil world, but we do not have to be part of it. The real new world order that will be created will not happen by human hands and with evil intentions, but is something that will be brought about by *Yeshua* when he delivers us from this spiritual slavery.

In previous censuses of the nation, they were all counted together as a unit. The census we are now learning about is different in that it would bring out each person's individual characteristics. For this reason, each tribe is counted separately, which almost sounds like a contradiction. This census is linked to the particular characteristics of each individual, but still each person is equated with every other. *Mosheh* is therefore commanded to appoint leaders for each tribe who would help with the census of the tribe, but each leader would also help with the census of the other tribes.

When we look at the quotes above, there is another interesting piece to note (cf. vv. 18, 20, 22):

Bemidbar 1 ²“Take a census of all the congregation of the children of *Yisra'el*, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, **head by head**, [emphasis added]

The word **לְגִלְתָּם** (*le-gul-le-go-Tam*) is the plural of **לְגִלָּת** (*gul-go-Let*), which translates as skull. We can now press the fast-forward button to the torture *Yeshua* had to endure, to learn where he was executed:

Marqos 15 ²²And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull.

This place got its name because of all the previous executions that took place here, and it is also where people's skulls were later buried. Some sources believe that *Adam's* skull was found here and hence the name. However, this cannot be confirmed. *Gulgotha* is part of the Mount of Olives and had a direct view of the entrance to the former temple. We see a strong indication that *YAH* does not spare any man and when the children of *Yisra'el* were numbered, He had every righteous person in mind for whom the Messiah would die.

As per *YAH's* command, each tribe was counted, head by head. Here Scripture makes a clear distinction between the true *Yisra'el* and other nations. We learned a few months ago that a mixed multitude went up with the people out of *Mitsrayim* (cf. *Shemoth* 12:38) and here it is also now explicitly stated that only men who are direct descendants of one of the patriarchs were to be counted – head by head. The mixed multitude was therefore not included as part of the census. We also learn from the book of *Bemidbar* the principles for the people's lack of trust: the mixed multitude, but also mixed motives, possibly put forward by the mixed multitude. This is a study that we will dwell on later.

The total of all the tribes showed that there would be 603 550 able-bodied men who could fight in a war. It is possible that *Mosheh* or other writers rounded the numbers so that only multiples of ten are seen in the final count. There are some skeptics who believe that these were not thousands, but rather should be seen as hundreds, according to the word **אַלֶּף** (*e-lef*), which is normally translated as thousand. However, the same word can also be seen as 'family' or 'tribe' and hence the disagreement among scholars. For what it's worth, we stick with what we see in Scripture.

The biggest problem, even with over 600 000 aspiring soldiers, is that they had never had any training; there was also a shortage of weapons at this stage. *Mosheh* was told not to count the tribe of *Lewi*, as they were set apart for service in and at the tabernacle. This was because of their abstention from worshipping the golden calf less than a year earlier. They would be counted later, but not for the purposes of war.

When the count is complete, we read again the words that appear more than 80 times in this book: “YAH spoke to *Mosheh*.” Sometimes this would include *Aharon* and on other occasions the expression is worded slightly differently. The only two chapters in which this expression does not appear at all are chs. 22 to 24, where we learn about *Bil'am* – something we will study a few weeks from now. The words that *Mosheh* now hears are that each tribe is to camp at a distance around the tabernacle. Some sources consider this distance to be as much as one kilometer away from the tabernacle!

Three tribes were to camp on each of the four sides of the tabernacle. Four leaders were appointed for each group of tribes: *Yehudah* on the east, *Re'ubēn* on the south, *Ephrayim* on the west and *Dan* on the north. Each tribe was also to display their tribal ensigns clearly. We learn from this that each person is important to YAH; He requires that the men be counted “head by head” and from the display of the banners this also indicates a different identity for each person. No two people are the same, therefore there are different banners. Families are brought together by YAH and therefore we must also be preserved as families, tribes, to His honour and praise. The collective banners would indeed indicate one nation.

The nation of *Yisra'ēl* were united as one, yet divided into twelve tribes. Each tribe had its own characteristics and was also blessed with its own blessings (cf. *Berēshith* 49:3-27). The banner of each tribe was necessary to maintain order within the camp, because in this way it was clear to see where which tribe would be. By belonging to a tribe, a lesser identity was created within the greater identity of the nation. General unity was created by the greater identity, while the particularity of each tribe was still preserved. In this way, there was a certain unity despite a type of division.

The order in which the nation encamped around the tabernacle is indicated by an illustration which we place in addendum A. *Mosheh*, *Aharon* and the priests pitched their tents at the entrance of the tabernacle, on the east side. The three sons of *Lēwi*, *Merari*, *Gērshon* and *Qeath*, pitched their tents on the north, west and south sides respectively. They would all prevent the rest of the nation from coming near the tabernacle, except for individuals offering sacrifices.

According to the *midrash*, the colours of each tribe corresponded to the colours worn by the high priest on the *choshen*, the breastplate. Each stone had a symbolic meaning and is also seen in the מַזְרוֹת (*Ma-za-rot*), the Hebrew version of the signs in the stars (cf. *Iyov* 38:32) or the English ‘zodiac’. Twelve months, twelve tribes, twelve signs of the zodiac, later twelve *talmidim*; this is no coincidence. We are expressly taught not to meddle with astrology (cf. *Debarim* 18:10-14), but that does not mean we should ignore the signs that YAH created for us (cf. *Berēshith* 1:14 *et al*).

We are not to place any value on what fortune-tellers try to teach us about our future – it is completely against YAH’s Word. He alone determines our lives and everyone on the Way of Truth must exercise the necessary trust, *bitachon*, to know that YAH will provide in all our needs. Long before modern navigational equipment was developed, sailors relied solely on the stars. We also know that the stars represent years, as the moon represents months and the sun represents days. None of the heavenly bodies may ever be worshipped in any form, but they are to be used for the purpose for which YAH created them. It is through these signs that we determine YAH’s calendar.

During his ministry on earth, *Yeshua* clashed not only with the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees over their own additional rules, but also over what they were hiding from the general public:

Luqas 11 ⁵²“Woe to you learned in the *Torah*, because you took away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered.”

We have mentioned this before and need to confirm it once again: our brother, *Yehudah*, is much more grounded in YAH's Word than we ever will be; therefore, it is important that we learn from him what the truth is in YAH's Word. However, we must be careful not to fall into the traps they set – either by adding or removing rules, or by simply following them blindly. Like us, who are grafted into the cultivated olive tree, they do not necessarily have all the knowledge, and *Sha'ul* was one of the first to recognise this:

Qorintiyim Aleph 8 ²If anyone thinks that he knows somewhat, he does not yet know as he should know.

When we look at the arrangement of the tribes around the *mishkan*, we see clearly how YAH placed them according to lineage. On the east side were only the children of *Lě'ah*, the woman YAH had chosen for *Ya'aqob*, people who were leaders in their own right. On the south side were two children of *Lě'ah* and one of her maidservant, *Zilpah*. The tribes on the west side were all children of *Rahě'l*, while the least notable tribes, descendants of both maidservants *Zilpah* and *Bilhah*, camped on the north side. This was also the order in which they marched through the wilderness. The group led by *Yehudah* covered the front, followed by the group of *Re'ubě'n*. The entire tribe of *Lě'wi* then followed with their charge of the tabernacle, according to the various tasks assigned as we will soon learn. The second last group was led by *Ephrayim* and the rear guard was covered by the tribes led by *Dan*. The strongest groups were therefore at the very front and at the very back and they had to protect the groups between them.

The tribe of *Lě'wi* was appointed as servants to the priests. Their task was to dismantle and transport the tabernacle. At a new camp site, they would re-erect the tabernacle. They would also serve as security guards to ensure that none of the other tribes would come near the tabernacle. The *Lě'wites* would also take the place of the firstborn:

Bemidbar 3 ⁹"And you shall give the *Lě'wites* to *Aharon* and his sons. They are the given ones, given to him from among the children of *Yisra'ěl*.

In the original text there is a repetition of the word 'give/designated': נָתַן (ne-tu-Nim). We can therefore read the text as: "...they were given to him...", which indicates that they would be dedicated both publicly and privately. This dedication was therefore not only during their service in the *mishkan* and later in the temple, but also during the time they were not on duty. Every *Lě'wite's* life therefore had to be directed at service in the set-apart place where YAH's Presence would rest. This brings us in line with the words of *Sha'ul*:

1. *Qolasim 3* ¹⁷And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the Name of the Master יהוּשֻׁעַ, giving thanks to *Elohim* the Father through Him.
2. *Qolasim 3* ²³And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Master and not to men,

After YAH commanded *Mosheh* to set the *Lě'wites* apart, they were also to be counted. This was not for the purpose of war, but for the service they would perform, as well as their being selected in place of the firstborn. Just like the rest of the nation, the *Lě'wites* were counted by families. The family of *Gě'rshon* and his sons *Libni* and *Shim'i* consisted of 7 500 males from one month old. They were responsible for all the coverings of the *mishkan*, both inside and out, as well as all the curtains and cords that went with it, except for the dividing curtain.

The family of *Merari*, with sons *Mahli* and *Mushi*, totalled 200 males from one month old and older. Their responsibility included taking care of the entire framework of the *mishkan* with crossbars, as well as the fencing of the courtyard with their bases, poles and ropes. The family of the second son of *Lě'wi*, *Qehath*, consisted of *Amram*, *Yitshar*, *Hebron* and *Uzzi'ěl*. The total number of males one month and older amounted to 8 600 and they were responsible for transporting and setting up all the furniture and other dedicated items in the *mishkan*. The son of *Aharon*, *El'azar*, also a descendant of *Qehath*, a priest in his own

right, was appointed leader over all the *Lěwites*. From the family of *Qehath* the priestly line would follow and therefore *El'azar* would hold the title of high priest after the death of *Aharon*.

It is indeed wonderful to see how *YAH's* plan works out when we look at the responsibilities of the *Lěwites* and how the other tribes would complement them. The principle of order and consecration, as we see through the operation of the tabernacle, is the principle of *YAH's* teachings and commands. Consecration is about the morality and honourable way of awe that stems from obedience. All creation obeys *YAH's* order of being set apart, for it is He alone who is completely set apart. Man is the only creature with a free choice to obey or disobey. This is the main reason why *YAH* teaches the people, chosen by Him, how to obey His commands, for obedience brings blessings. Without obedience to the heavenly tabernacle, order and implementation of *YAH's* principles on earth will bring about complete chaos and lawlessness. Chaos is caused by man living in disobedience due to a lack of knowledge of *YAH's* Word and denial of the plan He has set for us, even a lack of discipline. It is therefore extremely necessary that we study *YAH's* Word, in order to plead with Him through prayer for the necessary wisdom to walk in the set-apart lifestyle that He freely offers us.

When we look at the total number of the *Lěwite* tribe, we get 22 000. Since they would be in the place of the first-born, *Mosheh* is instructed to count the first-born of the rest of the people, the other eleven tribes. The total we get here is 22,273, which means that there were 273 more first-born than the tribe of *Lěwi*. They had to be redeemed by paying five *sheqels* each to the priests. In this way they were relieved of any responsibility for temple service. According to tradition, 5 *sheqels* are equivalent to twenty pieces of silver, possibly *denarii* (cf. *Berěshith* 37:28), for which *Yosěph* was sold at the time; here it is used for someone who is not part of the *Lěwitical* tribe, but to be exempt from temple service and also priesthood.

All male first-borns, both human and animal, are set apart for the simple reason that they represent the family, but they are also the first fruits of the woman's womb. As we have learned in the past, all first fruits belong to *YAH* (cf. *Wayyiqra* 23:10, 17, 20, 40; *Yehezqěl* 44:30 et al). When the first fruits are brought to *YAH*, the rest is also set apart. As the *Lěwites* gave themselves to *YAH*, the rest of the nation is considered being set apart and therefore every other nation or person who identifies themselves with *Yisra'ěl* and is grafted into the cultivated olive tree:

Romiyim 11¹⁶ Now if the first-fruit is set-apart, the lump is also. And if the root is set-apart, so are the branches.

When we bring our first fruits to *YAH* as an offering, everything we possess will be set apart. A set-apart lifestyle is all *YAH* requires of us, because it will establish our soul in the afterlife:

Hazon 14² And I heard a voice out of the heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder, and I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps. ³ And they sang a renewed song before the throne, and before the four living creatures, and the elders. And no one was able to learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. ⁴ They are those who were not defiled with women, for they are maidens. They are those following the Lamb wherever He leads *them* on. They were redeemed from among men, being first-fruits to *Elohim* and to the Lamb.

The *Lěwites* enjoyed more privileges than the rest of the nation, but all privileges come at a price. Part of their privileges was to transport the tabernacle and equipment from place to place. However, there would be a price to pay, punishable by death, if it was not done according to *YAH's* standard (cf. *Dibrei haYamim Aleph* 13:10; *Wayyiqra* 10:2 et al). Privileges expose a person to greater danger, require greater responsibility, and result in a more severe judgement. Privileges require more effort to successfully complete projects and result in other people becoming jealous and watching the privileged closely, quick to

criticise. In the heavenly Kingdom, rules of equality apply; the price to be paid will be measured by the amount of privileges.

Although *Qehath* was not the first-born, his tribe had the privilege of transporting all the furniture and equipment inside the tabernacle – the most important of all. The reason for this is that *Amram's* children, *Mosheh* and *Aharon*, as descendants of *Qehath*, were chosen by *YAH* to serve as priests. However, they would first have to wait until *Aharon* and his sons had completed the necessary preparations, because they were not allowed to enter the tabernacle. As we have just learned, those privileges would come at a price. We see a purposeful method of first covering the ark with the set-apart curtain, then a covering of dugong skins, and finally a blue cloth. Thus, each piece of furniture after this, first the table of showbread and then the *menorah* and altar of incense, had to be carefully covered before it could be transported. The final material for each piece of furniture was a blue cloth, which represents *YAH's* esteem.

Finally, the brazen altar of burnt offering is prepared by removing the ashes and covering it with a purple cloth, representing *Yeshua's* heavenly ministry according to the order of *Malki-Tzedeq*. The responsibilities that these men had to fulfill were no easy task. The same is expected of us in our walk on the Way of Truth in the footsteps of *Yeshua*. *Qehath's* descendants set the example to which we are to live a set-apart lifestyle.

Aharon's son, *El'azar*, was appointed to oversee the oil for the lampstand, the incense for the altar of incense, the grain offering, and the anointing oil. These elements are symbolic of our set-apart walk with *Yeshua*, for no one will be able to experience the ministry of *Yeshua* unless he or she experiences that same set-apartness:

Luqas 2 ³⁰for my eyes have seen Your deliverance, ³¹which You have prepared before the face of all the peoples,

Our prayer is that these words are not just spoken aimlessly, but may apply to each of us.

Shabbat shalom!

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Sources:

We prefer to not use the word 'God', because of personal conviction. In most cases, unless quoted from another source, it will be replaced by '*Elohim*' or inflections of the same word.

All citing of Scripture is taken from The Scriptures 2009, unless indicated differently.¹

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Messianic *Torah* with Commentary – Gary Gardner Ph.D. (Kindle Edition)

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¹ <https://isr-messianic.org/>

John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible

The Expository Notes of Dr. Thomas L. Constable

Faithlife Study Bible

Adam Clarke's 1810/1825 commentary and critical notes on the Bible

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Addendum A

