

TIMELESS TORAH

BAMIDBAR - Living With Purpose: The Power of a Number

Journey of Transition

Although Bamidbar actually means ‘in the Wilderness’, the Midrash refers to Sefer Bamidbar as ‘Chumash HaPekudim’ or, as it is more familiarly known, the Book of Numbers. This name is fascinating; of all the dramatic events and noteworthy themes related in this Sefer, why is the counting of the Jewish people so significant? The Netziv (Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, Volozhin, d. 1893) touches on this point in his introduction to Bamidbar, where he explains that the two occasions on which the Jewish people were counted in Sefer Bamidbar (the first in Parshat Bamidbar and the second in Parshat Pinchas) signified a pivotal change in the nation’s role and their manner of living.

Throughout the sojourn in the desert, the Netziv explains, the Jewish people lived a surreal existence, experiencing miracles on a day-to-day basis. This lofty way of life is reflected in this week’s parshah by the first counting, where the focus is on how the nation encamped surrounding the Mishkan, each tribe optimally placed where it could contribute its unique facet of Divine service. Specifically in the counting of Parshat Bamidbar, we find that in the tribe of Yosef, Ephraim is mentioned before Menashe. Menashe was the older of these two tribes, but Ephraim was designated as the spiritual successor of Yosef, and this is why he is given the primary position in the counting that took the Jewish people through the spiritual journey of the desert.

The second counting in Parshat Pinchas, however, denotes the shift from life in the

desert to the nation’s preparation for natural existence in Eretz Yisrael. In this counting, Menashe is mentioned before Ephraim, emphasising the need for leaders who could influence the nation on a material level. Additionally, in this second counting, not all of the heads of the tribes came from the tribe that they led, because what was critical here was not the spiritual essence of the people but the way they would best acclimatise in the Land of Israel.

This analysis of the Netziv can perhaps be appreciated better in light of an observation from the Kli Yakar (Prague, d.1619). The Kli Yakar points out that while in Parshat Vayikra, Hashem called to Moshe **from** the Ohel Moed (Tent of Meeting), in this parshah, Moshe was spoken to **inside** the Ohel Moed. This is because it was only after the Mishkan had been set up and Hashem’s Presence established among the people that Moshe was able to enter the Ohel Moed and communicate with Hashem, so to speak, face to face. Paradoxically, then, in Sefer Vayikra, which deals primarily with matters of holiness and spirituality, there was a certain distance between Hashem and the Jewish people. In Sefer Bamidbar, on the other hand, although this is the Book that relates the move back to ordinary existence, Moshe was able to represent the people from inside the Ohel Moed. In our lives governed by natural order, we have the potential to raise ourselves to even greater heights than when we are granted spirituality as a gift.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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Making the Numbers Count

As significant as this counting has been shown to be, its purpose remains unclear. The Ramban, after struggling with this point, suggests that the main reason for this census was to provide an opportunity for the people to present themselves to their holy leaders, Moshe and Aharon, and receive their blessing. As Rav Soloveitchik (d.1993) explains, a census can be made not only to find out the number of people being counted but also so that the ones counting will be able to know each person on an individual basis.

This insight sheds light on the dual use in this parshah of the word *pakad*. This word is first used throughout the summary of the census to mean 'numbers', but is used later in the parshah (verse 50) in the context of the appointment of the Levites as the guardians of the Mishkan. The connection between these two concepts is exactly as the Ramban suggested. When someone is counted, a focus is placed on them, removing them from the conglomeration of the general populace and highlighting their individual personality and talents. When such attention is placed on an individual, this is a calling for them to play up to their potential no less than any other appointment. As such, not only the Levites were given specific roles to play in the Midbar but all of the Jewish people were made to count as individuals.

Focused Goal

It is clear from the verses that the purpose of this census was not only to discover the

number of people in the nation but also to organise each tribe around their own flag as they travelled and camped throughout the desert. Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky (New York, d. 1986) asks a very simple question. This parshah was said nearly thirteen months after the Jewish people left Egypt and they had been travelling through the Midbar since then. Why, then, had no particular arrangement been made until now?

In general, Rav Kaminetzky answers, flags and pennants are divisive. It is true that a flag unites those who associate with it, but this unity primarily comes to the exclusion of everyone else. The nature of a flag or a pennant is actually to separate and differentiate groups of people from the rest of society. At the beginning of the Jewish people's journey out of Egypt, separating each tribe with their own flag would have been too dangerous. Only now that they were encamped around the Mishkan could each tribe highlight their own particular strengths because they were safe in the knowledge that, despite their differences, they were unified by the central point of the Mishkan.

This is a powerful lesson to take with us in any project we undertake. The first question we must ask ourselves before we begin a new role is why we are doing it. For our ancestors in the desert, the Mishkan at the heart of their camp provided them with a constant reminder of the purpose of their journey. Once we too have confidently answered that question, we will be better equipped to deal effectively with any challenges we come across.

**Next Week: Nasso - The Search For
Balance in Life**