

## Parsha B'midbar: [Numbers 1:1-4:20](#)

Evan Rolfe – May 2025

So, today we start B'midbar, or Numbers, with Parsha B'midbar. B'midbar, of course, means "In the Desert", making it one of the few times that the great Jewish tradition of naming texts semi-arbitrarily by the first distinctive word works well to describe it. Meanwhile, Numbers refers to two censuses that take place throughout the book

I picked Parsha B'midbar because I knew it had the first census, and since we've all hopefully taken part in a census, it seemed very relatable. I've always been really interested in the political state building of the Tanakh, where Israel moves from a family to a Kingdom, like when Samuel lists the challenges of hereditary monarchies to the monarchist Israelites, and in many ways, this seemed like an early stage of that process

In this parsha, the Israelites not only conduct a census, but also organize into a clear geographic structure with physical places for each tribe and then certain delineate roles, with the Levites taking on priestly duties, which are assigned specifically to individual clans in the tribe. There's also a bit of taxation (it's a bit of a stretch) with details around Pidyon Haben or redemption of the firstborn son. So, running with this state building concept, I was heartened that the first midrash I saw on this parsha taught that when God is about to make Israel great, God explicitly states the place, the day, the month, the year, and the era, as Numbers 1:1 says, "in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they were come out of the land of Egypt." The Midrash continued that God then said to the Israelites (rereading Numbers 1:2): "Raise to greatness all the congregation of the children of Israel"

But when I tried to pitch this concept to my gentile husband, he immediately asked what "greatness" even meant in this case, and I hit a dead end as soon as I tried to answer. Something about being numerous? How numerous is great, he asked?

In Genesis, G-d promises to make Abraham a great nation, which largely means being blessed, making his name great, blessing those who bless him, etc., and then later making his "descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore." There's actually even a strange passage in the Talmud that questions whether there even could be a census - that in the prophets, people were numbered by sheep or pebbles. It ends in an assertion while number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered and maybe the "cannot be measured" is for heaven and "cannot be numbered" is for humans...I think it's kind of beside the point, other than that I wasn't going to get a clear answer on what number was "great"

So, this makes the census seem pretty weird. Even stranger, there's a census in Exodus (Shemot) in Parsha Ki Tissa to determine per capita taxation. It comes up to the exact same number - 603,550 men. It would be one thing if these were years apart, but the rabbis say this Exodus census took place following Yom Kippur in the first year after the Exodus. Our Numbers census takes place on the first day of the second month (Iyar) of the second year, so about 7 months apart.

If they come up with the same number, why do two censuses? Did they expect anything different after the first one? And why is Israel great after the second one, but not after the first one, if they yield the same number?

I started to find an answer that I found compelling when I started looking at B'midbar the book, rather than B'midbar the parsha. We Jews tend to think of the Torah as a single entity, but in reality, the various books have very different structures but also varying degrees of structure. On the one hand, we have Leviticus, which is extremely orderly and keeps a shared structure and terminology throughout. It has two pieces, the Priestly Code (instructions for priests) and the Holiness Code (a set of theological and moral instructions). It reads coherently like it's written by one author or a small set of authors. On the far side, you have Exodus, which is all over the place. Scholars can't agree on a structure, but it contains a wide range of thematically similar material and is probably best described as an anthology. Numbers is more towards the side of Leviticus. In fact, I'd argue that of all the books, it's a narrative, with a clear beginning, middle, and end, shared thematic threads, and parallel structures

Numbers is structured around the two generations - the first condemned to die in the wilderness for disobedience and the new generation who will enter Canaan. It includes lots of parallel structures, including two censuses, one for each generation. It also has a number of shared themes, and we see two of these themes spelled out in Chapter 1

First, the census: The census solidifies that G-d has fulfilled a promise to make the Israelites numerous - as many as 2 million people depending on how you extrapolate the total number of people from the number of fighting men. Greatness is an assertion of the fulfillment of the promise, not a number of people. This fulfillment of G-d's promise heightens the folly of the upcoming rebellion. In the enduring contractual obligation that is Judaism, only one side has fulfilled contractual terms. The other is about to breach the contract repeatedly and will suffer consequences. Recall the Numbers 1:2: "Raise to greatness all the congregation of the children of Israel" (interpreting "raise the head" —**וַיִּשְׂאוּ**

שׂוֹרֵשׁ—to mean "raise to greatness"), but Rabbi Phinehas the son of Idi notes that the s'ur-shet-rosh could mean raising the head for execution, because if they were not worthy, they would all die. There's some serious foreshadowing going on. Furthermore, the census highlights that this massive army should be able to take on any foes. But the Israelites are about to refuse to enter the land based on the report of the spies, so again, context setting for future disobedience

A second theme is the centrality of the Tabernacle, the priesthood, and the presence of G-d within Israel, geographically expressed through the plans of the camp. This will foreshadow the betrayal of Israel, which is manifest through several events in the book, especially the worship of Baal-Peor.

So, now I'm supposed to leave you with some questions, so let me suggest a potentially interesting meta-question: What do we gain when we consider the Torah as a single entity, rather than individual books? What do we lose that we might gain when we focus book by book?

What other questions about how we read the Torah does this raise? Two to ponder: What do we gain and miss by focusing on parshot? Alternatively, we could be reading the Torah the way that we read megilot on holidays (all in one go) or focusing verse by verse or chapter by chapter, like many Christians. Some secular scholars believe that the Torah is a portion of a nine-book series that continues into Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, telling both the mythical history (Torah) and the historical record (Joshua through Kings) of Israel, with Deuteronomy/Devarim as a bridge text. How might that perspective change how we read Torah?