

May 22, 2020

Parashat B'midbar

Taught By:

Numbers 1:1-4:20

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## SUMMARY

This week, we begin *Sefer B'midbar*, the Book of Numbers, the fourth book of Torah. *B'midbar* means “In the wilderness,” and the book tells stories about the forty years that the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness. The English name, Numbers, is related to the counting of the tribes, which takes place in the first few Torah portions of *Sefer B'midbar*. We learn that the Children of Israel have been in the wilderness for two years, two months, and one day when G-d tells Moshe to take a count of the people--what we would call a census.

In particular, they counted those Israelites who would have been responsible to serve in the army--men between the ages of 20 and 60. Without the Tribe of Levi--they were counted separately--the total number was 603,550.

The men from the tribe of Levi are counted separately because they did not serve in the army; rather, they were responsible for taking care of and carrying the *Mishkan*--the portable sanctuary--and all the furniture and items found in the *Mishkan*. The Levites would take apart the *Mishkan* and carry it to wherever the next camp would be set up. Then they would set it up again. When the Israelites travelled on their journeys, they did so in a special order, with the *Mishkan* at the center. The Israelites are told that each time they stop they are to set up camp around the *mishkan* with three tribes on each side. As we chant, please listen for the words: *b'midbar sinai* - in the Wilderness of Sinai.



**LEORA:** I bet that all that time waiting made it feel even more special when the Israelites got to the Promised Land. It might have also helped God to be able to trust the Israelites more. The 40 years they spent in the wilderness gave God a chance to give them Torah, and to see how they behave.

**JENNA:** We learned in Judaics that in Torah the number 40 stands for transition and growth. Maybe the Israelites had to wait for 40 years because God wanted the community to grow or change in some important way.

**EMILY:** When we read Torah it's so exciting and we've wanted to do it for a long time, but we've had to wait for years. We've had to learn Hebrew and trope, and hear how other people read, and just grow up so we could be more mature. Maybe giving the community of Israelites 40 years to wander in the desert was God's way of giving the community more time to make them more responsible, older, and wiser so that they could be free and independent in their own land.

**2) Why do you think the Israelites would be told to count just the people who were appropriate to serve in the army?**

**EMILY:** The medieval Italian rabbi, Biblical commentator, philosopher, and physician, Sforno, taught that the Israelites who were appropriate to serve in the army were counted by tribe, not because they were preparing for war but as a way of organizing them "so that they could proceed to the land of Israel immediately, without delay, each one of them knowing to which tribe he belonged."

**LEORA:** I think they may be counting because they want to have a better idea of how many people there are and to make sure everyone is safe. Wandering in the wilderness can be dangerous, so they might want to be prepared.

**JENNA:** Maybe God wanted Moshe and Aharon to count people who could serve in the military, because these were the people who were strong and could work when the Israelites entered into the promised land.

**3) How do you think it felt to take apart the *mishkan* and rebuild it every time the Israelites moved?**

**JENNA:** I think I would feel like I needed to be careful, almost like in Operation Cooperation when we played a game with a ball and tubes and had to move the ball from one place to another without letting it touch the ground. Just like the Levi'im responsible for taking apart and putting together the Mishkan, we all had to work really well together and not drop the ball.

**LEORA:** I would feel like I'm on a team and we all have a mission that we have to complete--like when I played lacrosse with Sydney and everyone was depending on me to put the ball in the net. It's also like whenever I do a mitzvah, I might not want to do it but I do it anyway and then I feel good. Not only do I feel good, the person who benefitted from the mitzvah feels good, too. In this case the Israelites *and* God both benefit from taking apart, carrying, and putting the *mishkan* back together.

**1) Why do you think God chose to have the Israelites wander in the desert for 40 years before going into the Land of Israel?**

**EMILY:** It might feel like the first time I ever carried the Torah. It was heavy and made me a little tired to carry it, but I felt important and honored to be doing it. It felt like a *mitzvah*. If I were a Levite I would probably feel tired, because I imagine it would be hard work to take apart and put the *mishkan* back together again so carefully, but I would also feel like I was doing a good deed--a real *mitzvah*.