

PARSHAT BAMIDBAR

May 23 2020 – 29 Iyar 5780

Annual (Numbers 1:1-4:20): Hertz p. 568

Haftarah (Hoshei'a 2:1-22): Hertz p. 582

Torah Portion Summary

God instructs Moshe to take a census of the men of military age, 20 years and older. Moshe and Aaron, along with a designated leader from each tribe, conduct the census. The total for each tribe and the grand total are listed. The Levites are not included in the general census. God tells Moshe that the Levites are to be in charge of the Tabernacle and its furnishings. They are to carry it when the people travel, they are to set it up and take it down, and they are to camp around it to guard it. God tells Moshe and Aaron how the camp is to be arranged, with each tribe given a designated place surrounding the Tabernacle. The order of march also is specified. God tells Moshe that the Levites are to serve Aaron and the priests, doing the work of the sanctuary so that the priests may perform their sacred function. The Levites are to take the place of the first-born of each family as the ones who are dedicated to God. Moshe is told to conduct a census of the Levites, counting all the males from the age of 30 days up. The specific duties of each ancestral house of Levites are described. God tells Moshe to record every Israelite first-born male from 30 days up. The Levites are formally substituted for the first-born. Another census is taken of the house of K'hat among the Levites, counting those aged 30 to 50. The duties of this house, the transportation of the most sacred objects, are described.

I. So Moshe recorded them at the command of the Lord [literally: according to the word of the Lord], as he was bidden. (Numbers 3:16)

1. Moshe said before the Holy Blessed One: "How can I enter into their tents to learn the number of their infants?" The Holy Blessed One said to him: "You do yours and I shall do Mine." Moshe went and stood at the door of the tent and the Divine Presence went before him, and a Divine Voice went forth from the tent saying, "So and so many infants are there in this tent." Therefore it is stated, "according to the word of the Lord." (Rashi--Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, France)
2. Rashi cites the midrash that since the Levites were counted from the age of 30 days, Moshe asked the Almighty, "How can I enter the private tents of other people to know how many infants each family has?" The Almighty replied, "You do what is required of you, and I will take care of the rest." Therefore when Moshe walked in front of each tent, a Divine voice announced the number of people who lived in that tent. Rabbi Chayim Shmuelevitz used to note the importance of observing the principles of *derech eretz*. Although Moshe had a mitzvah to count the people, he felt it was wrong to invade the privacy of others. Each person's tent belongs to him and one must respect the privacy of the individual. Therefore the Almighty arranged a supernatural method of counting the Levites...A person's privacy is a very important emotional need. Even if a person is not doing anything wrong, he does not want other people to pry into his private matters out of curiosity. Even Moshe, the leader of the people, refrained from entering other people's homes when he felt that this would cause them discomfort or uneasiness. Do not allow your curiosity to cause any suffering to others. (Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, *Growth Through Torah*, pp. 310-311)
3. One of the most famous figures in medieval Jewish history is Rabbeinu Gershom, a tenth-century German Jewish scholar from Mayence, who also was known as *Me'or Hagolah*, "the Light of the Exile." Several far-reaching legal rulings in Jewish law are attributed to him...One of his less well known but still equally applicable rulings prohibits reading mail addressed to another. This applies even if the letter is addressed to someone with whom you're close. Thus, you're forbidden to open and read a private letter (as opposed to junk mail, for example) addressed to your spouse or child. Unless the person to whom the letter was addressed gives you permission to read it, you are not allowed to do so. Many people, particularly parents, violate this ruling, which often evokes understandable outrage in their children. Need one add that reading another person's even more private documents, such as a diary, is likewise forbidden? By extension, Rabbeinu Gershom's prohibition would extend to listening in on someone else's phone conversations, or listening to personal phone messages intended for someone else. (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *The Book of Jewish Values*, pp. 358-359)

Sparks for Discussion

Certainly you wouldn't walk into a neighbor's house without knocking or pick up a telephone extension to eavesdrop on her conversation. But how do we balance concern for privacy with protecting ourselves and others from the dangers of modern society? Do parents have the right – or even the responsibility – to search their children's rooms for drugs or monitor their internet activity? Can a person read a spouse's emails or check his cellphone log when infidelity is suspected? Should an employer use the information on applicants' Facebook pages in making hiring decisions? How much privacy should we surrender to travel by airplane or enter a public building? Where do you draw the line?

II. When Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sacred objects and all the furnishings of the sacred objects at the breaking of camp, only then shall the K'hathites come and lift them, so that they do not come in contact with the sacred objects and die. These things in the Tent of Meeting shall be the portorage of the K'hathites... The Lord spoke to Moshe and Aaron, saying: Do not let the group of K'hathites clans be cut off from the Levites. Do this with them, that they may live and not die when they approach the most sacred objects: let Aaron and his sons go in and assign each to his portorage. But let not [the K'hathites] go inside and witness the dismantling of the sanctuary, lest they die. (Numbers 4:15, 17-20)

1. For if they touch them, they are punishable with death at the hands of Heaven. (Rashi--Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, France)
2. They loaded the Ark of God onto a new cart and conveyed it from the house of Abinadav, which was on the hill; and Abinadav's sons, Uzzah and Achio, guided the new cart. They conveyed it from Abinadav's house on the hill, [Uzzah walking] alongside the Ark of God and Achio walking in front of the Ark. Meanwhile, David and all the House of Israel danced before the Lord to [the sound of] all kinds of cypress wood [instruments], with lyres, harps, timbrels, sistrums, and cymbals. But when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out for the Ark of God and grasped it, for the oxen had stumbled. The Lord was incensed at Uzzah. And God struck him down on the spot for his indiscretion and he died there beside the Ark of God. (2 Samuel 6:3-7)
3. "Do this with them" – that is to say, do on behalf of them that they may live and not die, by incurring the punishment of *kareit* (excision) when approaching the Holy of Holies, since the human soul, on approaching that which is holy, naturally yearns to see beyond the boundaries that are permitted it. Therefore you must cover up and conceal so that they shall not die, as a result of breaking through to see. (Don Isaac Abravanel, 1437-1508, Spain and Italy)
4. It is stated above that the sons of K'hat were given the vessels to carry only after they had been covered. It was forbidden for them to be present when Aaron and his sons were engaged in covering them. We suggest that the reason for this was that the holy vessels should not be regarded simply as material articles of use. The people should realize their inner symbolic significance. The Levites were charged with understanding the symbolic nature of the vessels that had been entrusted to their care. Had they kept their gaze directed in the holy vessels while they were being covered, this inner perception of their sacred purpose would have suffered, and they would have profaned their task. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany)

Sparks for Discussion

It is clear that unauthorized contact with the holy is dangerous, but what is the nature of that danger? Rashi believes it is physical and there is support in the Tanakh for his position. Abravanel and Rabbi Hirsch believe the danger is spiritual, but they disagree on the spiritual effects. Do you believe that coming into contact with the sacred is dangerous? Why? Do you think it is more likely that the danger is falling into mystical speculation and religious mania or losing the sense of awe about the holy? In the middle of the last century, most Conservative congregations maintained a certain distance between laypeople and the sacred. Services were conducted by robed rabbis and cantors set on a raised bimah several feet above the congregation. Few lay people – none of them women – saw the inside of a sefer Torah. Today most of our congregations encourage lay participation in all aspects of Jewish ritual – leading tefillot, reading Torah, giving *Divrei Torah*, and more. Contemporary synagogues are being designed with low central bima's surrounded by seating close to the Ark and its Torahs. Do you like these changes? Why? How does the physical nature of the building affect the spiritual nature of what takes place inside? What impact have they had in your community? Does coming closer to the Torah in this way bring you closer to God?