



Parashat Bemidbar

פָּרַשְׁתַּת בְּמִדְבָּר - ד' סיון תשפ"א May 9 - 15 2021

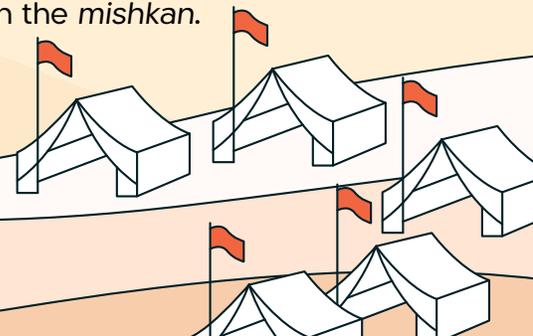


מה בפרשה • In This Week's Parashah

- ◆ The book of Bemidbar begins in the second month of the second year from when *Benei Yisrael* left Egypt. Moshe is told to count every male aged 20 and older, which are counted by tribes. The count adds up to be 603,550 men. The tribe of Levi, however, wasn't counted with the rest of *Benei Yisrael*.
- ◆ Each tribe is assigned to a specific location of their encampment, with the tribe of Levi surrounding the *mishkan* and the other tribes in an outer circle. The tribes are also assigned an order in which they travel.
- ◆ The tribe of Levi is designated to work in the *mishkan*, in place of the firstborns of *Benei Yisrael*, who were saved in Egypt during the 10th plague, מַכַּת בְּכוֹרוֹת/Death of the Firstborn, and therefore owed their lives to God.
- ◆ There were 273 more of *Benei Yisrael* firstborns than Levites, so those extra 273 needed to redeem themselves by paying five shekels to אַהֲרֹן/Aharon and his sons.

The three families of the tribe of Levi, גֵּרְשׁוֹן/Gershon, קֵהַת/Kehat and מֵרָרִי/Merari, are given jobs by family:

- ◆ **קֵהַת** family—responsible for carrying the vessels of the *mishkan* when traveling in the desert; they are also assigned to work in the *mishkan*.
- ◆ **גֵּרְשׁוֹן** family—responsible for carrying the fabric covering the *mishkan* itself.
- ◆ **מֵרָרִי** family—responsible for carrying the skeleton of the *mishkan*.
- ◆ The men of the tribe of Levi that were 30-50 years old worked in the *mishkan*.





שאלות לדין ומחשבה • Discussion Questions

- ◆ There is a lot of counting going on in the *parashah*. What kinds of things do you count in your life? Why do you count them?
- ◆ What do you think: Does counting mark how special each thing you count is, or does each thing become less special when you give it a number?



מי היו חכמינו • Who were our sages?

ברוריה Beruriah

According to the Talmud, Beruriah was a great scholar who lived in the second century. She was the daughter of Rabbi Hananiah ben Teradion and was married to Rabbi Meir. She is one of the few women mentioned in the Talmud and it is said that she learned "three hundred laws from three hundred teachers in one day." She was sharp and well-versed in Torah and *halakhah*. One time, when she was in the *beit midrash*, she came across a student who was studying quietly rather than out loud. She kicked him and reprimanded him, teaching him "ערוכה" לא כן כתוב 'ערוכה', אם ערוכה ברמ"ח אברים שלך – משתמרת, בכל ושמורה, / "Isn't it written in the Torah: 'Ordered in all things and secure?' From this we learn that if you use all 248 of your limbs (i.e. your entire body in studying it) your learning will stay with you, but if you don't use your voice, then you may forget your learning? (Eruvin 53b-54a).





רְגַע שֶׁל עִבְרִית • A Moment of Hebrew

מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה כָּל־יֵצֵא צְבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
תִּפְקְדוּ אֹתָם לְצַבָּאתָם אֶתְּה וְאֶהְרֹן:

לִפְקֹד (שָׁרֵשׁ פ.ק.ד.)

1. To count

מִפְקֹד = Census or assembly

(במדבר א:ג)

2. To command or order

מִפְקֹד = Commander

3. To remember or visit

פְּקִיד = Clerk

Find the Word!

Open a Siddur to the Amidah or a *bentcher* to הַמְזוֹן/בְּרַכַּת הַמְזוֹן/Grace after meals and find the יְבוֹא וְיֵעָלֶה/!/Ya'aleh Ve-yavo prayer for Rosh Hodesh and holidays.

Can you find the word in there that has the same שָׁרֵשׁ/root? How many times does it appear in the prayer?



הַלְכָּה • Halakhah



Count me in!

Have you ever noticed someone counting a group of people by saying a *pasuk* instead of using numbers? Have you wondered why that is or where that custom came from?

When *Benei Yisrael* were in the desert, the first census was done by each person bringing a half shekel. By counting those, Moshe would know how many people there were. In the Talmud (Yoma 22b) it says that when the כֹּהֲנִים/priests were counted, they put out their fingers to be counted, and they weren't counted directly! When asked about this strange custom, Rabbi Yitzhak said: It is prohibited to count Jews directly, even for a *mitzvah*. This is learned from the way King Sha'ul counted his soldiers. It says that "he numbered them with *bezek*" (I Shmuel 11:8), meaning that he counted them through shards, one shard representing each person, rather than counting them directly.

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But why not count people directly?

King David counted his people directly—"Go and count Israel from Beer-sheba to Dan and bring me back their number" (I Divrei Ha-Yamim 22:2)—and later, a plague struck and 70,000 Jews died, which led people to believe that it is bad luck to count Jews directly.

Today, the custom is that when counting ten adults for a *minyan*, one recites a *pasuk* which contains ten words rather than using numbers. This is one *pasuk* that is commonly said:

הוֹשִׁיעָהּ | אֶת־עַמֶּךָ וּבְרַךְ אֶת־נַחְלָתְךָ וְרַעַם וְנִשְׂאָם עַד־הָעוֹלָם:

(Tehilim 28:9)

"Deliver and bless Your own people; tend and sustain them forever."



פְּרָשְׁנוֹת • Commentary

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי־אַהֲרֹן הַבְּכוֹר | נָדָב וְאַבְיָהוּא אֶלְעָזָר וְאִיתָמָר:

(Bemidbar 3:2)

"These were the names of the sons of Aharon the firstborn Nadav, and Avihu, Elazar, and Itamar."

ספורנו

"וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן" כֹּל אֶחָד מֵהֶם הִיָּה נֶחְשָׁב בְּשֵׁמוֹ לֹא מִצַּד מָה שֶׁהוּא בֶּן אַהֲרֹן בְּלִבְד:

"These were the names of the sons of Aharon"—each one of them was mentioned by his name, i.e. not only because he was a son of a well-known father such as Aharon.

- ♦ According to Sforno, why are each of Aharon's sons mentioned by name?
- ♦ What are ways that people identify you other than your name? Do people ever recognize you as "so-and-so's child" or someone's sibling? How does that feel when that happens?



מִדְרָשׁ • Midrash

There are often gaps in the Torah's telling of the story and there are also phrases that are curious and draw our attention. *Midrash* tries to fill in gaps in the story while also answering questions or resolving difficulties. You can think of *midrash* as where the text and an idea meet.

Bemidbar Rabbah 1:7

"And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert"

(Bemidbar 1:1). Why the Sinai Desert? From here the sages taught that the Torah was given through three things: fire, water, and the desert. How do we know it was given through fire? From Shemot 19:18: "And Mount Sinai was all in smoke as God had come down upon it in fire." How do we know it was given through water? As it says in Shof'tim 5:4, "The heavens dripped and the clouds dripped water [at Sinai]." How do we know it was given through the desert? As it says, "And God spoke to Moses through the Sinai Desert."

במדבר רבה א:ז

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי, לָמָּה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי? מִכָּאן שֶׁנוֹ חֻכְמַיִם: בְּשִׁלְשָׁה דְבָרִים נִתְּנָה הַתּוֹרָה, בָּאֵשׁ, וּבַמַּיִם, וּבַמִּדְבָּר. בָּאֵשׁ מִנֵּינִי? (שְׁמוֹת י"ט, יח): וְהָרַ סִינַי עָשָׂן כְּלוֹ וְגו'. וּבַמַּיִם מִנֵּינִי? שְׁנַאֲמַר (שׁוֹפְטִים ה', ד): גַּם שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ גַם עֲבִיבִים נָטְפוּ מַיִם. וּבַמִּדְבָּר מִנֵּינִי? וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי.

- ◆ According to the *midrash*, why does the Torah add the two words *בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי*/in the Sinai Desert to the first *pasuk* of the *parashah*? Isn't it obvious that this is where God is speaking to Moshe, given that they are still wandering in the desert?
- ◆ What do you think it means that the Torah was given through fire, through water, and through the desert? How would the experience of receiving the torah through each of these elements be different?

And why was the Torah given through these three things? Just as fire, water, and the desert are free to all the inhabitants of the world—so too are the words of Torah free to them, as it says in Yeshayahu 55:1, "Oh, all who are thirsty, come for water..."

וְלָמָּה נִתְּנָה בְּשִׁלְשָׁה דְבָרִים הַלְלוּ? אֲלֵא מָה אֵלּוּ חֲנָם לְכֹל בְּאֵי הָעוֹלָם, כִּי דְבָרֵי תוֹרָה חֲנָם הֵם, שְׁנַאֲמַר (ישעיה נה, א): הוֹי כֹּל צָמְא לְכוּ לַמַּיִם.

- ◆ The *midrash* explains that just like fire, water, and the desert belong to all living things, so does Torah. What does it mean that Torah is free to all? Do you agree with that statement?





הַפְּטָרָה • Haftarah

This week's הפְּטָרָה/haftarah is from הוֹשֵׁעַ/Hosea (2:1-22). It starts with the *pasuk*

”וְהָיָה מִסְפָּר בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּחֹל הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִמָּד וְלֹא יִסָּפֵר.”

“The number of the *Benei Yisrael* will be like that of the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or counted...”

- ◆ This *pasuk* talks about the promise that there will be so many of *Benei Yisrael* that it won't be possible to count them. But our *parashah* is all about counting and getting the exact number of *Benei Yisrael*.
How do you think these two ideas are connected?



קְרִיאת הַתּוֹרָה • Torah Reading

The Ten Mysterious Sets of Dots עֶשְׂרֵת נִקּוּטוֹת

If you have ever looked into a תּוֹרָה סֵפֶר/Torah Scroll, you know that the first line of our *parashah* in a תּוֹרָה סֵפֶר would just look like this:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי בְּאֵהָל מוֹעֵד

No vowels and no notes, just letters. But look at this verse from later on in our *parashah*. What do you see?

כָּל פְּקוּדֵי הַלְוִיִּם אֲשֶׁר פָּקַד מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עַל פִּי

What are those dots on top of the word וְאַהֲרֹן? Why does Aharon's name appear here with these special symbols?

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There are 10 places like this in the Torah where a letter, a word, or even a phrase is topped with dots. There have been lots of answers suggested as to why this is so. One *midrash* says that when Ezra the Scribe was copying down the Torah, he was unsure about some of the words he was writing, so he marked them with dots. He said, "When Eliyahu comes in the Messianic Age, he will tell us if we should keep these letters in the Torah or not!" In the case in our *parashah*, the Talmud (Bekhorot 4a) says the dots are here because Aharon did not actually participate in the job of the counting of the Levi'im, the topic of this verse. (Look carefully at Bemidbar 3:14-15—only Moshe is commanded to count the Levi'im!) He is listed here because of his more general work in helping to count the people, but the dots are there to remind us that he wasn't central to this part of the story.

The next dotted word in the Torah comes around in two weeks, in Parashat BeHa'alotkha. Keep your eyes peeled!



שאלות השבוע • Parashah Scavenger Hunt

Find these answers in this week's *parashah*. The first seven questions are keyed to the seven aliyot: one answer found in each. The last three can relate to any part of the *parashah*.

Good luck!

1. What was the minimum age to be counted in the census?
2. Which tribe had the most people, and how many?
3. Which three tribes camped on the south side of the camp?
4. What were the names of Aharon's four sons?
5. The tribe of Levi has three subdivisions (based on the sons of Levi). What are they?
6. How many more firstborn were there than there were Levi'im?
7. Three colors of cloth were used to cover various parts of the *קִטְוֹן*. What were they?
8. The name of one of the heads of the tribes actually changes within the *parashah*. Which tribe and what is the change?
9. Which part of the tribe of Levi was responsible for moving the אָרוֹן/Ark from place to place?
10. There is a word in our *parashah* that appears in the Torah with dots on top of it. What is it?





Shavuot • שבועות



Cantillation • טעמי המקרא

Look closely at the following words and the notes on them from the Torah reading for the first day of Shavuot. Notice anything strange?

זְכוֹר אֶת־יְוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ: שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלַאכְתֶּיךָ: וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּתוֹ לִיקְוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל־מְלָאכָה אֲתָהּ וּבִנְךָ־וּבִתֶּךָ עִבְדֶּךָ וְאִמְתֶּךָ וּגְרֶךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ: כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־יָמִים עָשָׂה יְקֹוֹק אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיִּנַּח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל־כֵּן בִּרְךְ יְקֹוֹק אֶת־יְוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ:

There are actually two sets of notes here on top of one another! One of these sets belongs to what's called טעם עליון—a "higher" and more stretched out version of the usual Torah notes—and one to what's called טעם תחתון—the "lower," simpler, usual form. Let's separate them out:

טעם עליון

טעם תחתון

זְכוֹר אֶת־יְוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים
תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלַאכְתֶּיךָ וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי
שַׁבָּתוֹ לִיקְוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל־
מְלָאכָה אֲתָהּ וּבִנְךָ־וּבִתֶּךָ עִבְדֶּךָ וְאִמְתֶּךָ
וּגְרֶךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־
יָמִים עָשָׂה יְקֹוֹק אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־
הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיִּנַּח
בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל־כֵּן בִּרְךְ יְקֹוֹק אֶת־יְוֹם
הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ:

זְכוֹר אֶת־יְוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ: שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים
תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלַאכְתֶּיךָ: וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי־
עִי שַׁבָּת לִיקְוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל־
מְלָאכָה אֲתָהּ וּבִנְךָ וּבִתֶּךָ עִבְדֶּךָ וְאִמְתֶּךָ
וּגְרֶךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ: כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־
יָמִים עָשָׂה יְקֹוֹק אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ
אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיִּנַּח בַּיּוֹם
הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל־כֵּן בִּרְךְ יְקֹוֹק אֶת־יְוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת
וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ:

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The notes on the right are the “normal” style of notes we use. The phrases don’t go on too long, and paragraphs get divided up into lots of verses. (This one has 4.) The notes on the left go on at length—this whole paragraph becomes one long sentence! Why?

Well, this paragraph is from the עֲשֹׂת הַדְּבָרוֹת/The Ten Commandments, and there are two ways to think about reading it:

- ◆ We can approach it as we do any other set of verses in the Torah. Even if it takes four verses for God to tell us about observing Shabbat, that’s how long it takes.
- ◆ Or, we can treat each *commandment* as one long sentence by stretching out phrases. That’s how we read the עֲשֹׂת הַדְּבָרוֹת when we read them in the synagogue on Shavuot. Since we are reenacting being at Mount Sinai when the עֲשֹׂת הַדְּבָרוֹת were actually spoken, we want it to feel like 10 special sections, not just a series of verses.
- ◆ But if you can’t make it to a public reading on Shavuot—that happened to most of us last Shavuot, because of COVID-19!—then you just read the verses regularly in the “lower” set of notes. A reminder of how important community is for really reenacting and experiencing things.

This different system is used in three places in the Torah—Shemot 20:2-14, Devarim 5:6-18, and Bereishit 35:22. Look it up and see if you can find it!



חֵי • חֵי וְהֵי • Halakhah and Jewish Practice

Are you allowed to have plants in shul? That might seem like an odd question, but actually, the Torah is pretty nervous about having trees near the places where we worship God. Devarim 16:21 says: לֹא תִטֵּעַ לְךָ אֲשֵׁרָה כָּל־עֵץ אֲשֵׁרָה אֲשֵׁרָה אֲשֵׁרָה לְךָ תִטֵּעַ לְךָ/Don’t plant an Asherah or any tree whenever you make an altar of the Lord your God. An אֲשֵׁרָה/Asherah was a special kind of tree that idol worshippers used to put in their holy places. The Torah doesn’t want us to incorporate worship of trees and nature into our service to God, so we keep trees away from altars.

But plants are also beautiful, and being in nature can inspire us to connect more deeply to God. Shavuot was and is an especially beautiful time of the year in Europe. By then, it was finally warm after a long winter and lots of plants were in bloom. **Maharil** (Germany, 14th-15th c.) tells us that the practice in his community was to put out fragrant grasses and roses in shul as part of celebrating Shavuot! **R. Moshe Isserles** (Poland, 16th c.) later describes this as the widespread practice of European Jews:

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רמ"א אורח חיים תצד:ג
וְנוֹהֲגִין לְשַׂטַּח עֵשְׂבִים בְּשָׂבוּעוֹת בַּב"ה וְהַבְּתִים, זְכָר לְשִׂמְחַת מִתֵּן תּוֹרָה.

Rema Orah Hayyim 494:3

It is the practice on Shavuot to lay out plants in the synagogue and in people's homes; this is in memory of the joy of the giving of the Torah.

Later sources connected this joyous display of greenery to the physical setting of the giving of the Torah. At one point, God warns Moshe not to allow the people's animals to graze on the slopes of סיני/Mount Sinai—that shows they were full of grass and green! So if we want our prayer spaces on Shavuot to remind us of Sinai, we want to make it green with lots of plants.

Others didn't like this practice. **The Gaon of Vilna** (Lithuania, 18th c.) tried to put a stop to it. He thought Jews were just trying to copycat their Christian neighbors and imitate the way they decorated their churches. And others thought the whole practice was too similar to planting a tree near an altar—exactly what the Torah forbade!

But many communities kept doing this, seeing it as just another way to make serving God more beautiful and to help us imagine being back at the moment of the giving of the Torah, on the green slopes of Sinai.

Does your community have any special plants for Shavuot? When does being in nature just draw you into its own beauty and when does it help you feel closer to God?

Answers (with verses where you can find them):

1. 20 (1:3);
2. Yehudah—74,600 (1:26);
3. Reuven, Shimon, Gad (2:10-14);
4. Nadav, Avihu, Elazar, Itamar (3:2);
5. Gershon, Kehat, Merari (3:17);
6. 273 (3:46);
7. תְּכֵלֶת (sky blue), תּוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי (crimson), אֶרְגָּמָן (purple) (4:6-13);
8. The head of the tribe of Gad: 2:14, 1:14, אֶלְיָסִיף בֶּן דְּעוּאֵל/רְעוּאֵל;
9. בְּנֵי קֵהָת—the descendants of Kehat (3:27-31);
10. וְאֶהְרֵן (3:39)

Shabbat Shalom!

~ שַׁבַּת שְׁלוֹם ~

