

# Organizing a Nation

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Parshat Bemidbar has no long lasting commandments in it. The counting of the Jewish people there, as well as the second counting later on in the book of Bamidbar in parshat Pinchas, seems to be the reason it is known as "Chumash haPekudim", the Book of Numbers.

Most of the Torah can be neatly divided into the two categories of "story" and "law". Parshat Bamidbar would technically fall into the "story" category. But upon further thought its story is a unique category of its own. It is not a story about specific people or personalities. nor does it reveal to us anything about the collective nature of the Jewish people.

The parshah is about organization. The people are counted as 12 separate tribes, and then reorganized as 4 groups of 3 tribes each. Then the Levites are counted, and then the first-born. At that point the Levites by entering the service of God redeem the first born, and the remaining first-born redeem themselves with 5 shekel each. The parshah ends with the description of the responsibilities of the Kehat family of Levites.

The overall lesson of the Parshah is quite deep, so deep it demands being understood by setting an example, rather than by command.

The message is this. Communal, and especially national existence, requires organization. The notion that God takes the Jewish people out of Egypt and from there on we will wing it as far as how to administer ourselves is mistaken. Our self civil rule, the absolute necessary result of our newly found independence, demands structure. And structure requires information. People cannot be governed if we have no idea how many they are. The tribes will have princes responsible for this administration.

Nor can they be governed without recognizing and identifying the subgroups that are being subject to this rule. If there is a priestly group that will have both special obligations and privileges, they too must be identified and counted. Their unique status must be recognized and quantified. In our case, the transition from special religious status attached to the first-born, and replacing them with the Levite tribe, must be formalized and made permanent.

Jewish history has a difficulty throughout its course that is central to its meaning and continuity. On the one hand, the Jewish people are a religious entity. Their uniqueness is wholly dependent on this truth. Without this, they are merely another nation of many people and professions. But in order to be a holy nation, one must be a nation in the fullest sense of that term. Only then can the unique attribute of holiness be attached. The tension between being a nation at large, and a holy nation in particular, is a good portion of what we are all about.

The message of Parshat Bemidbar is then clear. All the mitzvot of Sefer Bemidbar; tumah, sotah, nazir, Menorah, Chatsotrot, karbanot, tzizit, Kehunah, Parah Adumah, Nedarim, Kashrut, and more, are all predicated on a functioning organized nation. Only then will we be able to serve God not only as a person, but as a people.

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