במדבר | NUMBERS

A PARSHA COMPANION

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Rabbi David Fohrman

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The *Parsha Companion* series
is reverently dedicated by

Ronny & Toby Hersh

in memory of their parents

אברהם בן אהרן הלוי ז"ל
אסתר בת אברהם יהושע ז"ל

Abraham & Esther Hersh *z"l*

שמואל משה בן פסח יוסף ז"ל
חיה רבקה בת צירל ז"ל

Moshe & Rivka Zytelny *z"l*

and the many among their family
who perished in the Shoah

About Our Parents

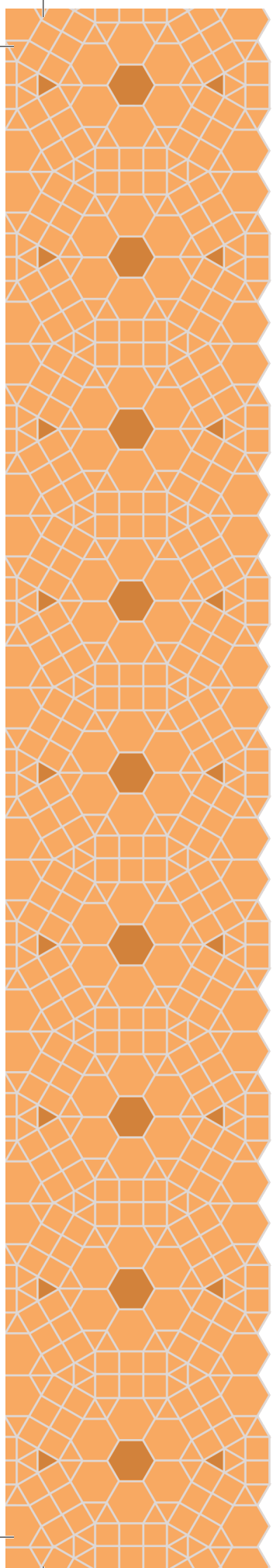
Our parents surmounted great tragedy and hardship to live exemplary lives. They loved us, nourished us, and sacrificed much to help us flourish and become committed Jews. In their example, we saw sacred values of the Torah brought to life. We live in the shadow of their deeds.

ABRAHAM AND ESTHER HERSH hailed originally from the Carpathian Mountains. They were both survivors of Auschwitz, and they met after the war in a displaced persons camp in Germany. Shortly thereafter, they made their way from the ashes of Europe to the Land of Israel, where Abraham fought in Israel's War of Independence. He was a fierce lover of both the land and the Torah of Israel. Together, Abraham and Esther lived difficult lives but, through it all, somehow always maintained a deep faith in Hashem. Their strong values — commitment to family and to Judaism, and an abiding love of the State of Israel and the Jewish people — made powerful impressions upon their children.

RABBI MOSHE AND RIVKA ZYTELNY made their way from Europe to America. Toby's father was, in his younger years, a *yeshivah bachur* in Kletzk. Before Lakewood was a gleam in the eye of history, he became a close student of Rabbi Aharon Kotler, and a *chavruta* of his son, Rabbi Shneur. He escaped the ravages of war by heading, with his yeshivah, first to Siberia and then to Kazakhstan, where he met his wife, Rivka. The couple moved from Kazakhstan to France — and all this time, despite war and constant upheaval, Rabbi Aharon remained like a father to him. To this day, Ronny and Toby cherish letters in their possession that Rabbi Aharon sent to Rabbi Moshe in France, advising him on major life decisions. Eventually, Rabbi Moshe and Rivka came to America, where he rejoined his rebbe and yeshivah in Lakewood. There, he became part of an unlikely success story, as he helped reestablish a vibrant center of Torah on new and distant shores. All in all, Moshe was the only one in his entire immediate family to survive the war. Together, he and Rivka raised seven children.

Our parents lived through harrowing times and emerged with a steely, strengthened faith; they sacrificed much to pass on their vibrant heritage. We remember them with love, and are honored to carry their legacy forward.

Ronny & Toby Hersh



The Numbers volume of the
Parsha Companion is dedicated by

Dr. Bruce Wayne Greenstein

& Ms. Monica Patricia Martinez

in honor of

Dr. Melvyn and Irene Greenstein

Our family's association with Rabbi Fohrman and Aleph Beta stems from recognizing the magic of combining challenging Torah concepts and compelling insights with animation that appeals to both young and old. In a world that so often seems increasingly distant from the eternal values espoused by our sages and our Torah, this publication of a treatise on Bamidbar — a defining moment in history when the Israelites wavered from revolution to dedication to all that Hashem taught them — is most appropriate. We are deeply honored to have the Greenstein name associated with this incredible work.

Dr. Bruce Greenstein

We gratefully acknowledge the following patrons who, with generosity and vision, have dedicated individual volumes of this *Parsha Companion* series:

BEREISHIT

Tuvia Levkovich *a"h* & Barbara Levkovich

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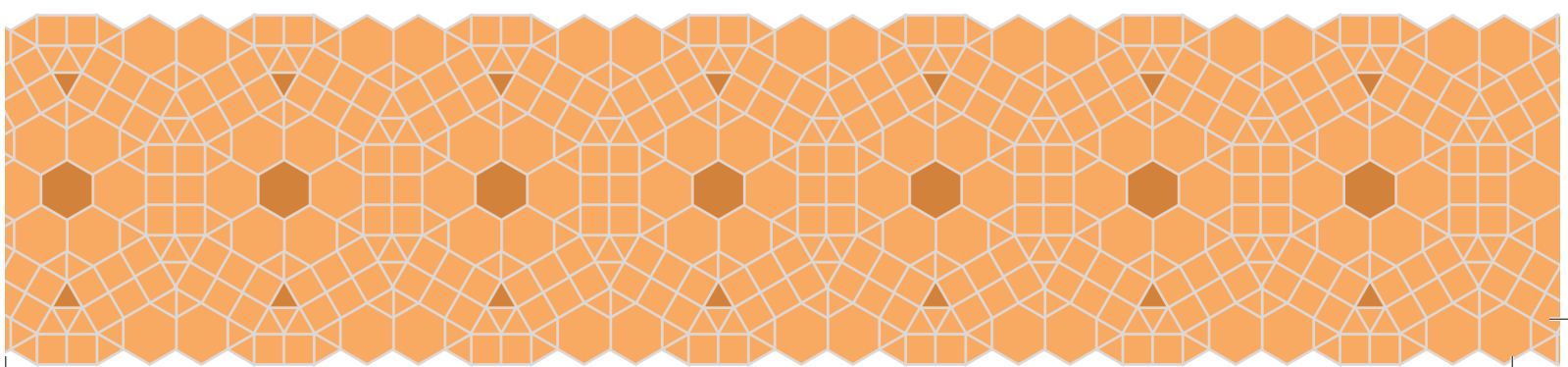

Some Words of Appreciation

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS chronicles Israel's sojourn in the wilderness. And, I must say, writing this volume of *Parsha Companion, Numbers,* would have felt like a sojourn alone in the wilderness for *me* — were it not for the companionship of a hearty band of collaborators. I'd like to take a moment to thank them and acknowledge their contributions to this shared endeavor.

Ronny and Toby Hersh are the patrons of this five-volume series of *Parsha Companions*. I have spent many memorable afternoons learning parsha with Ronny and Toby and their extended family, and it feels especially fitting for this series of books to bear their names. They have dedicated the series to the memory of their parents, Abraham and Esther Hersh *z"l* and Moshe and Rivka Zytelny *z"l*.

I would also like to acknowledge the Legacy Heritage Fund for its generous support in making this series of books possible. The foundation focuses much of its effort on supporting Jewish education. I am honored that the Legacy Heritage Fund has included this series of books among the many worthy projects they've chosen to champion.

This "Numbers" volume of the series has been generously sponsored by Dr. Bruce Greenstein and Monica Martinez, in honor of Bruce's parents, Dr. Melvyn and Irene Greenstein. Bruce is an avid enthusiast of my work, and I'm proud to call him a friend. Bruce's parents, Dr. Melvin and Irene, were innovators, founders, and supporters of Jewish education in many forms, and it is an honor to have their names associated with my work.

I also want to acknowledge those who have dedicated other volumes in the *Parsha Companion* series: Tuvia Levkovich *z"l* and Barbara; Dan and Jamie Schwartz; and Andrew and Terri Herenstein, along with the many dedicators of the Leviticus volume. Sadly, Tuvia, patron of the Genesis volume, has passed away since the publication of the volume that bears his name. May the thanks of those who've benefited from his generosity continue to nourish his soul in the Land of the Living.

* * *

A number of folks have helped shepherd the ideas in this book into the essays that you now hold in your hands. I'd like to offer them my thanks and tribute.

Among them are Mathew Miller and Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, of Koren Publishers Jerusalem. They have been assisted by Caryn Meltz, Estie Dishon, Rachelle Emanuel, and Debbie Ismailoff, as well as other members of the Koren team. All have been great to work with. The people at Koren are proudly bringing a new generation of original Jewish thought to the public, one beautiful book at a time. We are all enriched by their efforts.

On the Aleph Beta side, the principal editing of this volume was done by Shoshana Brody. She has an eye for beauty, a sensitivity to spirituality, and a mind that will not tolerate fuzziness or redundancy. She has brought all of these qualities to bear in editing these essays will love, skill, and care. She's also designed the graphics and charts that grace these pages. Adina Blaustein managed all the moving parts and pieces — and there were many of them! — in her role as project manager. She also provided valuable feedback and background research on many of the essays. Immanuel Shalev was invaluable as a *chavruta* partner working through many of these ideas; and his advice on issues of structure and presentation was invaluable. I want to thank, as well, Rabbis Eliyahu Raful and Elinatan Kupferberg, whose research skills, judgment, and stature as *talmidei chachamim* I relied on throughout the manuscript. My thanks also go to Cory Rockliff, who designed the series' overall aesthetic.

Many of the ideas in this book on Numbers had their *own* genesis, as it were, in parsha videos I created with the help and support of the amazing team at Aleph Beta (you can find those videos at www.aleph-beta.org). I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge, with gratitude, those behind the scenes who have, over the years, helped to transform Aleph Beta from a mere idea, to a fledgling start-up, to a viable, going concern: its founders, board of directors, and officers. They are Etta Brandman, Alan Broder, David Hamburger, Jeff Haskell, Josh Malin, David Pollack, Donny Rosenberg, Robbie Rothenberg, Dan Schwartz, Kuty Shalev, and Steve Wagner. I want to thank, as well, the manifold subscribers of Aleph Beta, who each support our work in ways great and small, and provide us with meaningful feedback, appreciation, as well as a dose of constructive criticism. Having you by our side gives us the drive and motivation to continue. I also want to mention that a few of

those subscribers — Laura Burdick; Eliakim and Nechama Pessil; and the entire Bang family; Scott and Shari Norvell; the Hackett family; Nat, Ayesha, Aliyah, Caleb, and Zach Schuster; Neal Gittelman, MD & Associates — made special donations to help shepherd this book through its production. I am grateful to them as well.

The *Parsha Companion* series, not to mention the rest of my work — none of it would have been possible were it not for three men, each of whom is no longer with us. All three played an outsized role in nurturing my development over the years. My father, Moshe Fohrman *z"l*, passed away when I was quite young, but he taught me so much about life, people, and relationships in the short years we had together; his love and influence continue to pervade my work. My stepfather, Zev Wolfson *z"l*, a man of towering accomplishments, took me under his wing, believed in me, and helped me thrive. LeRoy Hoffberger *z"l*, a bulwark of the Baltimore Jewish community, became a dear friend and mentor. LeRoy and I first met when he attended a class that I taught at Johns Hopkins University; he took a keen interest in my work and ultimately helped give it life by creating the Hoffberger Foundation for Torah Studies. The love of all three I shall carry with me as long as the One Above deigns that I walk the earth.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my family. My wife, Reena, has given me her unfailing love and support, and has partnered with me in the greatest endeavor of my life — raising seven delightful children: Moshe, Shalva, Avigail, Shana, Yael, Ariella, and Avichai. All have helped shape this book in ways great and small, for they, together with my four sons-in-law, Yosef, Boruch, Moshe, and Chaim Dovid, really are *my* "parsha companions." Many of the ideas contained in these pages were born, shaped, or refined in animated discussions with them around the Shabbos table. I treasure those moments: Learning Torah with my family is a constant opportunity to talk about things that matter deeply with people I care about the most — and what could be better than that?

Rabbi David Fohrman

Woodmere, NY
January 2025

INTRODUCTION

What Is the Book of Numbers About?

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS — what is it really about?

In Hebrew, Numbers is *Bamidbar*, literally "in the wilderness."[1] At some level, the book seems to reflect its name both literally and metaphorically.

Let's start with the literal. Having left Egypt, but having not yet arrived in the Land of Israel, the book of Numbers really *is* about the Israelites' journey through the wilderness.

Although in the beginning of Bamidbar, the journey begins with great hope and anticipation — the people are only eleven days away from the Promised Land, and it seems they will soon triumphantly enter — in no time those hopes come crashing down with the catastrophic sin of the spies. In response to that failing, God decrees that this generation will not enter the Promised Land; rather, they will wander for forty years in the desert, until the generation dies out and a new generation grows up, in the wilderness, to take their place. The people *will* enter the land, but that will be a dream deferred. For now, it will just be … wilderness.

On the literal level, *Sefer Bamidbar* is about wandering through a desert — being in no-man's-land — in a very tangible, physical sense. But I would argue that the book is also about a more metaphorical desert journey. It's a story about losing the anchors that help us feel at home, even as we journey physically through no-man's-land. But it's not just that; it is about what happens when we enter no-man's-land, not just physically but *spiritually* as well.

The anchors I'm talking about are our parents.

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1 The English name for the fourth book of the Torah, Numbers, derives from the Greek translation of the rabbinic term "The Book of Counting," reflecting the census taken at both the beginning and end of the book. However, in Hebrew, it is called *Bamidbar*, meaning "in the wilderness." This name was chosen partly because *bamidbar* is the fifth word in the text, but it also encapsulates the book's central theme, as I demonstrate in this introductory essay.

A Book About Parents?

While parenthood might not seem like the first theme that comes to mind when considering Numbers, I make the argument in this volume that the priestly blessing found early on in the book of Numbers is, in fact, a kind of incredibly concise parenting manual. Its three brief sentences provide guidance on how to shepherd a child through three critical phases of life. The priestly blessing teaches parents how to keep a child safe and warm. It teaches parents how to love. And it teaches them the hardest of lessons, too: how to ultimately let go.

As it turns out, this theme — how parents let go of children, and children let go of parents — is not just of theoretical interest in the book of Numbers. It becomes a matter of practical reality soon enough. There are several examples of these bittersweet partings in the book of Numbers — Moses' loss of Yitro comes to mind[2] — but none quite as momentous as that which occurs toward the end of the book, where we encounter the mysterious story of Moses hitting the rock. Moses finds himself barred from entering the Land of Israel as a result — but in truth, that story is not *just* about how the people lose Moses as their leader; it is a story about the loss of an entire family of leaders, an entire family of "national parental figures."

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2 In **Parshat Beha'alotecha**, Yitro, Moses' father-in-law and advisor, decides it is time for him to leave and go home. Moses pleads with him to stay. He tells his father-in-law that God has good things in store for the people, and Yitro will share in that goodness. But Yitro declines. In words that echo — almost like a reverse image — the call of Abraham to leave his homeland, Yitro tells Moses (Num. 10:30):

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, לֹא אֵלֵךְ, כִּי אִם אֶל אַרְצִי וְאֶל מוֹלַדְתִּי אֵלֵךְ.

And he said to him, "No, I will not go with you; rather, I will return to my land and my birthplace."

In some ways, Moses has been through this before. This is Moses' *third* parental loss. First, he lost Yocheved and Amram, his birth parents. That happened in the reeds at the Nile, where Moses' mother placed him in a basket in a desperate attempt to preserve his life. Years later, Moses lost his adoptive mother, the daughter of Pharaoh, when he fled Egypt to escape the wrath of Pharaoh. Then, when he married Tzippora, her father Yitro entered Moses' world, and became the only parent left in his life. Yitro advised him and cared for his welfare. But now, in the book of Numbers, Yitro would leave too.

After all, it is not just Moses, but — for reasons I discuss in the essay on **Parshat Chukat** — Aaron, too, who is destined to die for that act of hitting the rock. Moreover, this very same story begins by letting the reader know that Miriam, Moses' sister, had just died. Within a mere few lines, this one story seals the fates of all three major leaders of that first generation. None of them will be there to usher this newly born nation into its land.

Four Events

Then, just after we encounter the fateful story of Moses striking the rock, we read of several events that take place in quick succession:

1. Israel is attacked by surprise. The aggressor is the Canaanite king of Arad, identified by the Sages as a disguised version of Israel's ancient nemesis, Amalek.[3]
2. The people become travel weary and speak disparagingly about the manna.
3. They come upon a wellspring of fresh water in the desert.
4. Thankful for this well, the people burst out in song to God. The Torah relates this by telling us:

אָז יָשִׁיר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת Then Israel sang this song.

Numbers 21:17

So, dear reader, I have a question for you: *Does that list sound familiar to you at all?* Is there, perchance, another moment in the Torah when we encounter all of these elements?

There is. All four elements do appear earlier. They come in quick succession, just like here. And they come in precisely the same order — only *backward.*

It all happens way back in the book of Exodus.

The Four Events, Backward

***Az Yashir*: A Song of Thanksgiving.** Back in Exodus, you will recall, the Israelites sing a triumphant song at the sea. Remarkably, that song begins

3 See Rashi on Numbers 21:1.

with the very same words we just saw toward the end of the book of Numbers, *az yashir*:

Exodus 15:1

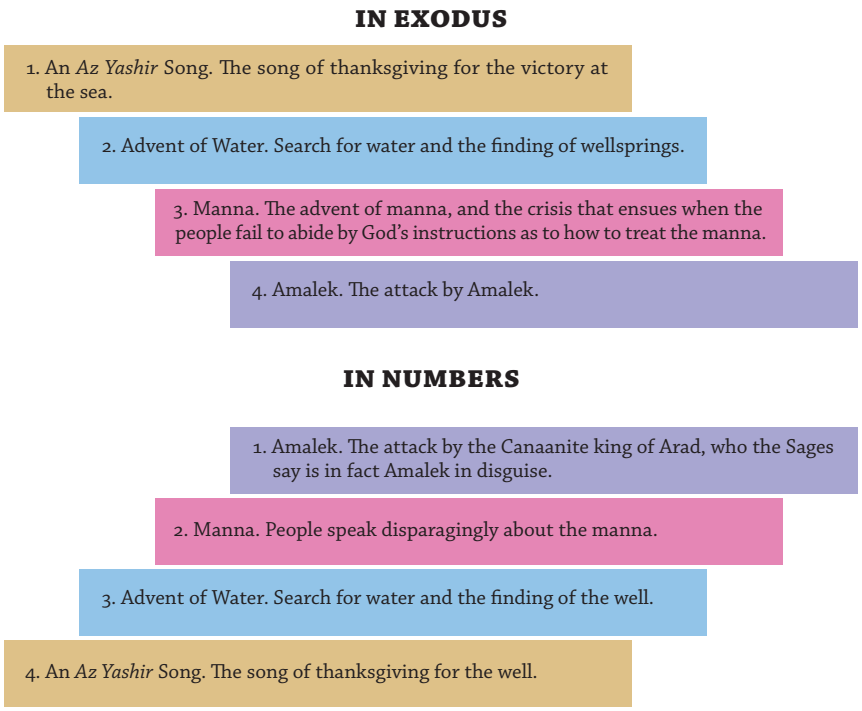
אָז יָשִׁיר־מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת	Then Moses and the Children of Israel sang this song

The Advent of Wells. Shortly after that, in the very same chapter, the people thirsted for water. God leads them to an oasis at Marah, whose bitter water miraculously turns sweet when Moses casts a branch into it. Shortly after *that*, at the very end of chapter 15, the people find twelve wellsprings in the desert.

The Advent of Manna — But the People Don't Do Right by the Manna. Just after the discovery of the wells, in Exodus chapter 15, God gives the people manna for the very first time in chapter 16. Along with the manna, God gives them some very simple instructions as to how they are to treat it. For example, the manna will not fall on Saturdays, and no one should go out in the fields on Saturday to try to collect it; instead, they will receive a double portion on Friday. Nevertheless, some of the people *do* go out on Saturday looking for the manna. They fail to properly abide by God's instructions.

An Attack by Amalek. And what happens immediately after this manna crisis? The people are set upon by Amalek. God tells Moses to ascend with Aaron to the top of a hill, where he can overlook the battle. So long as Moses keeps his hands raised skyward, Israel prevails. Aaron and Hur support Moses' hands, and Amalek is vanquished, at least for the time being.

So, there it is. Four events from Exodus are replayed here, at the end of the book of Numbers, in backward order:



A Forty-Year Chiasm

If you've read some of the other volumes of this series, you are probably familiar with this literary structure. It's a chiasm — an ABCD-DCBA pattern, sometimes known as an *atbash* pattern in the world of Jewish mystical texts. Our case, though, is a remarkable version of an *atbash* pattern: It is a pattern that spans vast tracts of text, linking verses in Exodus to those in Numbers. Forty years separate the events in this chiasm: the four events in Exodus took place just as Israel was beginning its journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, and the four events in Numbers occur forty years later, as Israel nears the end of its long, winding journey.

So, what is the meaning of our chiasm? What is it that the Torah wants us to understand, once we've managed to pick up on this elegant series of inverted parallels?

Of Parallels and Contrasts

The important clues to answer that question, I think, come from noticing that the parallels are not just parallels, but are also contrasts. The most

blatant contrast comes, perhaps, in who it is that sings the great song of thanksgiving at each bookend of these forty years:

NUMBERS: THE SONG AT THE WELL (21:17)	EXODUS: THE SONG AT THE SEA (15:1)
אָז יָשִׁיר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת Then **Israel** sang this song.	אָז יָשִׁיר־מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת Then **Moses and the Children of Israel** sang this song.

In the first song, in the book of Exodus, Moses leads the Children of Israel in song. In the second song, in the book of Numbers, it is the people of Israel who lead *themselves* in song.[4]

A similar thread seems to wind itself through the other events of the chiasm, too. Back in Exodus, the people thirsted for water, and Moses miraculously turned the bitter pool of water into a fresh, sweet oasis. The people themselves, back in Exodus, didn't do anything. They were passive. They thirsted and complained that the water was bitter. When the water was sweetened for them, they drank, but did not offer thanks or break into song. All of that changes in the book of Numbers. There, the people dig the well, as they themselves acknowledge in their words of thanksgiving:

Numbers 21:18

בְּאֵר חֲפָרוּהָ שָׂרִים כָּרוּהָ נְדִיבֵי הָעָם	The well, which the princes dug, which the nobles of the people dug.

Moreover, in Numbers, the people sing joyously in response to the appearance of the well. Even though they are the ones who dug the well, they still see fit to sing in gratitude. They attribute their ability to find the well to God.

And what of Moses, the great leader who sweetened the water the first time around, back in the book of Exodus? In the book of Numbers, his

4 Cf. *Ba'al HaTurim* (Ex. 15:1), citing *Midrash Tanchuma*.

role with respect to the wells fades into the background. It is the people who find the well, and it is the people who sing about it.[5]

And now let's talk about the manna. In both Exodus and Numbers, there is a crisis involving the manna. In both cases, the people do wrong by this wondrous gift from God. In the book of Exodus, they violate the rules that God gave them as to how and when they should collect it. In the book of Numbers, they speak disparagingly about the food granted them from Heaven. In both cases, they, in some way, shape, or form, take the manna for granted. But what's different about these episodes is what happens afterward. In the book of Exodus … *nothing* happens afterward. The people are silent in the face of God's displeasure. In the book of Numbers, though, they respond to God's anger with an apology:

Numbers 21:7

וַיָּבֹא הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ,
חָטָאנוּ כִּי דִבַּרְנוּ
בַיקֹוָה וָבָךְ.

The people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against God and against you."

And finally, let's consider the battle against Amalek in each instance. In both cases, the people of Israel fend off the threat from the marauders. In the book of Exodus, however, Israel does so through the agency of Moses. Moses takes the initiative: He ascends a hill, accompanied by Aaron and Hur, and by raising his hands heavenward, controls the destiny of the war. In the book of Numbers, Moses is not part of the story. The people of Israel *themselves* take the initiative. The people address God directly and make a vow to Him:

5 Cf. Rashi and Bamidbar Rabbah on Numbers 21:18. According to some interpretations, the people are alluding to wells that Moses had revealed to the people forty years earlier, that stayed with them miraculously. He is one of the "nobles of the nation" acknowledged in the song. Even so, though, the explicit role of Moses fades into the background in the book of Numbers. The people are in direct conversation with God about the wells. And they are acknowledging that whatever human endeavors allowed for the wells' revelation, the ultimate thanks for their beneficence rightfully goes to the Almighty.

Numbers 21:2

וַיִּדַּר יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶדֶר לַיקֹוָק
וַיֹּאמַר, אִם נָתֹן תִּתֵּן אֶת הָעָם
הַזֶּה בְּיָדִי, וְהַחֲרַמְתִּי אֶת
עָרֵיהֶם

Israel vowed a vow to God, and said, "If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities."

This unilateral initiative by Israel, without mediation from Moses, is not only acknowledged but directly answered by God, as we see in the very next verse:

Numbers 21:3

וַיִּשְׁמַע יְקֹוָק **בְּקוֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל**
וַיִּתֵּן אֶת הַכְּנַעֲנִי

God listened **to the voice of Israel** and delivered up the Canaanites.

God didn't listen to the voice of Moses, pleading on behalf of the people. God listened to *Israel*. Directly.

The Three Faces of *Hoda'ah*

In the book of Numbers, the same four events happen as in Exodus — but the role of Israel in each of them changes dramatically. In Exodus, the people are largely silent. Events *happen* to them. In the book of Numbers, the people are active. They transform themselves, ever so cautiously, from object to subject.

And, in the book of Numbers, what the people *do* as they transform themselves in this way is also notable: They thank God. They praise Him. And they admit wrongdoing.

Thanks, praise, and admission. It turns out that there's a common denominator in these three things. You see it in the Hebrew language itself. In English, thanks, praise, and admission are each separate words. In Hebrew, though, there is a single word for all three. That word is *hoda'ah*.[6]

6 When I want to say "thank you," I say "***todah***," from the root *yod-dalet-heh* (*yadah*). When I admit something to you, such as acknowledging the truth of your position rather than mine, I can say "a*ni* ***modeh*** *lecha*," from the very same root. And when

Why would the Hebrew language have a single word for three different ideas? Clearly, Hebrew does not consider these to be three different ideas, but three facets of the same idea. Let's endeavor to understand why.

What do thanks, praise, and admission all have in common?

It turns out that all three of these are marvelous relationship savers. I once heard it quoted in the name of Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski that you really need to know only three phrases to have a successful marriage: "Thank you," "I'm sorry," and "I admire you." These three phrases are powerful because they reset relationships in a very basic way. They rehabilitate relationships on the verge of withering.

How do they do this?

The Great Threat to Relationships: Imbalance

It turns out that relationships abhor imbalance. Any relationship, we might say, starts out naturally in a state of balance. When I begin to be friends with you, our relationship with one another is on equal footing. But that equality in our relationship can quickly change. Let's say I do you a favor. Now I'm up here, and you're down there. Our relationship is, at least temporarily, out of balance.

And that's just the *nice* way that our relationship can get out of balance. Our relationship can get out of balance in not-so-nice ways, too. Let's say I do something terrible to you. Now I'm down here, and you're up there. You have the moral high ground, and I have sinned against you. A gulf separates us. Things are uncomfortable.

When a relationship gets out of balance, a force begins to silently assert itself, trying to nudge the relationship back into balance. Let's say I graciously do you a favor. You move into my neighborhood, and my kids and I come over that night with some wonderful, fresh-baked muffins in hand. My kids sit down with your kids and help them with their homework. How do you feel? What do you want to do? You want to reciprocate the favor. With a simple act of reciprocity, our relationship can get back into balance.

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we extol and praise God in our prayers, we once again concoct a word out of that same root — for example (Ps. 105:1):

הוֹדוּ לַיקֹוָק קִרְאוּ בִשְׁמוֹ.

Praise God; call in His name.

The power of this dynamic should not be underestimated. Here's a tip: When you enter a car dealership and sit down with the salesperson to talk about what cars might work best for you, don't take the Coke he offers you from his personal little refrigerator underneath the desk. Why? Because if you do, you've just accepted a favor — and you will feel a need to reciprocate. But you don't have any easy way to reciprocate … except by buying his car. I'm not kidding here: You're going to feel psychological pressure to buy that car, a $50,000 investment — all because of a $0.35 can of Coke. The urge to repay a favor — to seek balance in relationships — is extremely compelling.

Alternatives to Reciprocation

Here is the rub, though: It is not always advisable to reciprocate. Sometimes you just can't; not every favor can be repaid. Sometimes you can … but you don't want to go that route. Reciprocation, after all, may come with a whole boatload of problems. Let's say we turn to the not-so-nice way that relationships get out of balance: Bob has done something to harm you. There's a part of you that wants to reciprocate, a part of you that wants to take revenge against Bob. Not for nothing do they say that revenge is sweet. But another part of you puts the brakes on that impulse. You feel there must be another way to rebalance this relationship. But what is it?

That's where *hoda'ah* comes in.

Thank you, and *I'm sorry*. They seem to be different things, but at the core, they are very similar. How do you convey gratitude without saying the words "thank you"? You say, "I appreciate what you've done." The word "appreciate" means to recognize the value of something. When I recognize the value of what it is that you've done for me and communicate that recognition to you — and then you accept that recognition — all of a sudden, our relationship resets itself and is in balance again. Likewise, how do you express regret without saying "I'm sorry"? That, too, involves recognition. You say, "I understand the terrible thing I've done to you, and I feel awful about it." When you make that recognition and it is accepted by the other person, your relationship can become whole again.

Thanks, praise, and admission. What these things have in common is that they're all about the recognition of imbalance as a way of resetting a relationship. While an act of *hoda'ah* may seem like a simple thing, actually making the recognition at the heart of *hoda'ah* is hard to do. Instinctively,

when we intuit that an important relationship of ours has gotten out of balance, we want to avert our eyes from that truth. We would prefer to sweep the problem under a rug. But if you have the courage to fully and unflinchingly say that you're sorry, or say "thank you" — that radical act of recognition sets a wondrous paradox in motion. By recognizing and expressing the imbalance in your relationship — with that, somehow, the imbalance can resolve. The relationship can reset itself.

Because the way *hoda'ah* works is so counterintuitive — because it seems to make no sense at all that recognizing an imbalance can restore balance — true *hoda'ah* can be hard to come by in this world. People instinctively avoid it. But, if we muster up the courage to perform *hoda'ah*, a kind of miracle takes place. Our relationship can be rehabilitated, even when reciprocation is not available to us.

When the Children of Israel...Are No Longer Children

Perhaps here lies some of the meaning of the forty-year chiasm that we noticed before.

Something has changed over these forty years. In the beginning, the Children of Israel really were...children, at least in a sense. They were a just-born nation, getting their bearings in the no-man's-land of the wilderness. Like any just-born entity, they had parents, those who helped usher them into existence — a heavenly Parent, but also earthly ones like Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. These "parents" — the earthly ones, at least — would try to teach them how to behave, and would help them out of fixes they somehow managed to get themselves into. Miriam and Moses would teach them how to sing in *hoda'ah*. Moses would instruct them. Aaron would help hold up Moses' hands, to miraculously defeat the Amalekites.

But earthly parents aren't around forever. Over time, children need to grow up. Thus, the end of the book of Numbers tells us of the impending deaths of these three luminaries. Miriam dies, setting off a chain reaction. The Well of Miriam dries up (see Rashi on Num. 20:1, and the essay on **Parshat Chukat** in this volume), and Moses hits the rock. Moses is told by God that he and Aaron too will die before entering the land. And, just a few verses later, that process starts to get underway. At the very end of Numbers chapter 20, Moses takes Aaron up a mountain, and there, Aaron is laid to rest.

And it is right then that the second half of the chiasm begins. It is right at this moment, in Numbers chapter 21, that Amalek attacks, that the manna crisis befalls the people, that wells are found, that the people sing. And it is at this moment … that the people begin to discover the secret of *hoda'ah*.

Hoda'ah: It's How We Grow Up

Learning to say "thank you," learning to admit I'm wrong and say "I'm sorry," learning to admit to myself, and to you, that I admire you — these are the things we teach our children to do. We teach them these things because they are the fundamental skills necessary to be an adult in this world, to be someone capable of independently cultivating relationships. If we are to have any hope of properly managing our incipient relationships, we must learn to do these things, or else those relationships will collapse in a heap around us. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that, just as Israel's earthly parents begin to leave them, it is these three things that Israel learns how to do.

What the Book of Numbers Is About

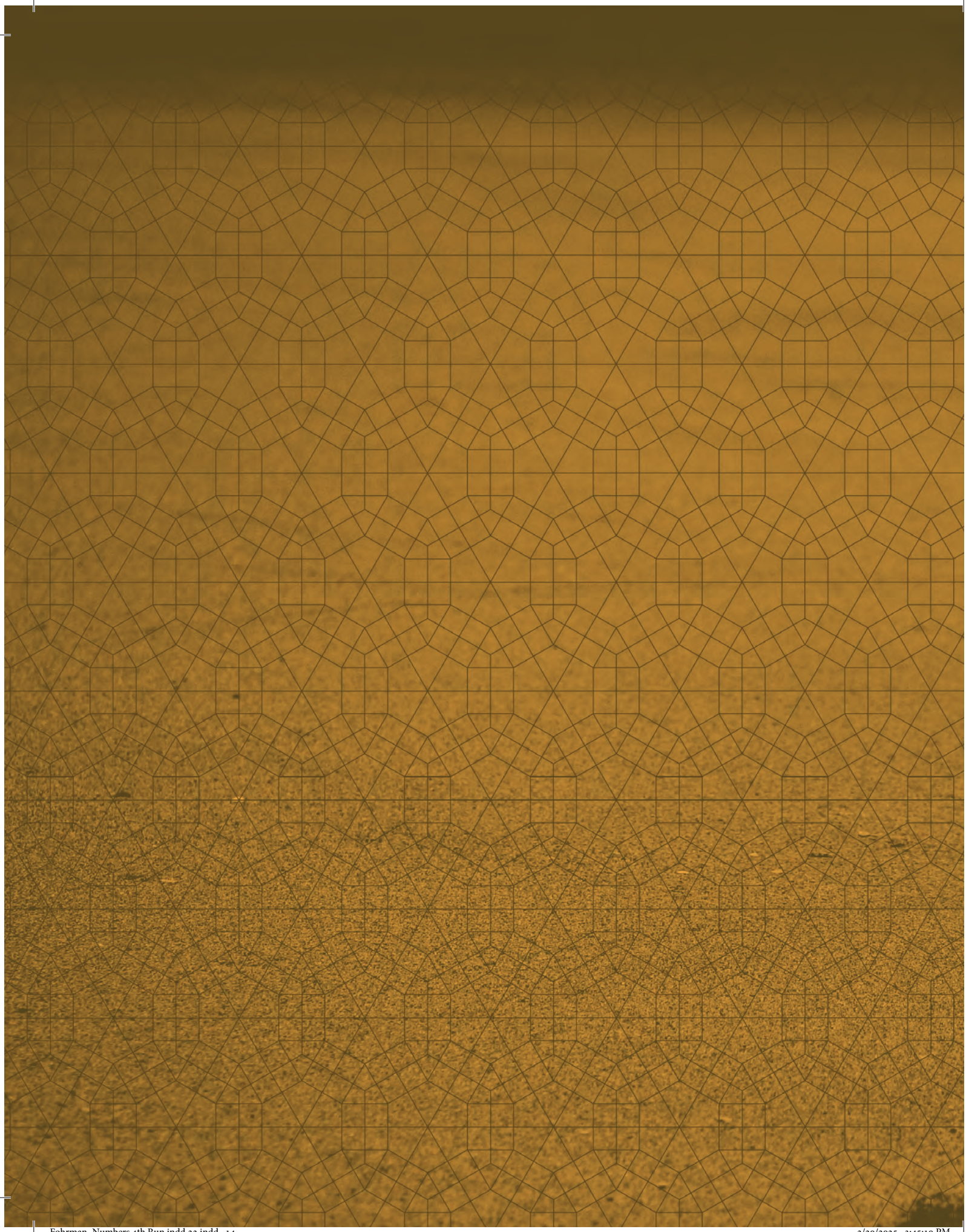
What is the book of Numbers about, then? It is a book about parents and children. It's a book about losing parents. But it's also a book about growing up as our parents begin to leave us. I mentioned earlier that in Exodus, the first time Israel sang a song to God, they were led by Moses, and the second time, the people initiated the song on their own. But there is another difference between these two *az yashir* episodes — a more subtle difference, perhaps. Look at how the people are characterized in each:

NUMBERS: THE SONG AT THE WELL (21:17)	**EXODUS: THE SONG AT THE SEA (15:1)**
אָז יָשִׁיר **יִשְׂרָאֵל** אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת Then **Israel** sang this song.	אָז יָשִׁיר־מֹשֶׁה **וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל** אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת Then Moses **and the Children of Israel** sang this song.

Back in Exodus, the people were "the Children of Israel." But here, in the book of Numbers, as they sing this song on their own, they are called just…"Israel." The word "children" has somehow been dropped. Perhaps that is not a coincidence.

The book of Numbers is perhaps aptly named. As I mentioned before, in Hebrew, *bamidbar* literally means "in the wilderness." And that's an accurate description of the book in all sorts of ways beyond the obvious. This is a book about losing one's earthly parents and confronting the fear of being left alone in a barren and austere world. But it's also about a nation's struggle to transcend childhood, to claim, however tentatively, a certain spiritual independence — and part of that independence is the realization that they are not *really* alone, as harsh as the world out there can seem. Yes, it's a wilderness. But the gifts of our Heavenly Parent — bread from the heavens, wells of water from the earth, protection from the marauders that threaten us — remain with us. They are constant reminders that our Parent in Heaven may be invisible, but He is present in our world nevertheless — and it is up to us to build a lasting relationship with Him.

Let's begin to read this book together.



BAMIDBAR

Why We Count

שְׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עֲדַת
בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם
לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם בְּמִסְפַּר
שֵׁמוֹת כָּל־זָכָר לְגֻלְגְּלֹתָם׃

Count the heads of all the congregation of the Children of Israel by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head.

NUMBERS 1:2

BAMIDBAR

Why We Count

AS WE CRACK OPEN *Sefer Bamidbar*, I'd like to explore one of life's big questions with you — the question of how we find meaning in life. I'd like to do that from a bit of an unconventional perspective: using **Parshat Bamidbar**, along with the work of three artists — Jackson Pollock, Claude Monet and Georges Seurat — as a lens. If that sounds disjointed, or unduly challenging, just hang on and let's see where this goes.

What's Love Got to Do with It?

Parshat Bamidbar is all about counting. The beginning of the book devotes scores of verses to the counting of the Israelites. It seems fair to ask: What's with all this counting? The emphasis on counting feels inordinate — especially since the one who requests a census here is actually… the Almighty Himself. One wonders why such a count was even necessary. Surely God knows how many Israelites there are without having to count them.

As it happens, we're not the first ones to wonder about this. Rashi implicitly addresses the issue with the following, enigmatic comment:

מִתּוֹךְ חִבָּתָן לְפָנָיו מוֹנֶה אוֹתָם כָּל שָׁעָה

Because of God's love for [Israel], He counts them all the time.

Rashi, Numbers 1:1

Rashi suggests that counting is an expression of love. As such, it serves more than a utilitarian purpose. It isn't just about knowing numbers. The process matters, too. There is something about the *act* of counting, Rashi is suggesting, that conveys care and regard. Counting conveys love.

Why does the act of counting carry such overtones?

Two Words

We find a clue, I think, in two key phrases, each of which conveys the idea of counting. In **Parshat Bamidbar**, when the Torah discusses God's command to Moses to conduct this census, the text uses two verbs in particular: נשא (*nasa*) and פקד (*pakad*). What is interesting about these two terms is that not only does each mean "to count," but each also has *another* meaning, too. The interplay between the two secondary meanings of each word is intriguing — and, I believe, instructive.

You can actually watch the secondary meanings of each word come into play if you pay close attention to the verses in our parsha. Indeed, no sooner does the Torah, in **Parshat Bamidbar**, use both נשא and פקד to mean "count," than it immediately employs the very same word to express its secondary meaning.

Let me show you what I'm talking about. Here is a verse in our parsha. With just a glance, you'll notice the verse contains forms of both roots:

Numbers 1:49

אַךְ אֶת־מַטֵּה לֵוִי לֹא **תִפְקֹד**, וְאֶת־רֹאשָׁם לֹא **תִשָּׂא** בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃	However, do not **count** the tribe of Levi. Do not **count** their heads among the Children of Israel.

But now look at the very *next* verse. Once again, you'll find words that derive from the very same roots, but this time, neither term means "count":

Numbers 1:50

וְאַתָּה **הַפְקֵד** אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם עַל־מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדֻת...הֵמָּה **יִשְׂאוּ** אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן וְאֶת־כָּל־כֵּלָיו	You should **appoint** the Levites over the Tabernacle...they will **carry** the Tabernacle and all its utensils.

Now, all of a sudden, **פקד** means "to appoint": The Levites are *to be appointed* in charge of the Tabernacle and all its utensils; and now, all of a sudden, **נשא** here means "to carry," or even more literally perhaps, "to lift up":

הֵמָּה **יִשְׂאוּ** אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן	They will **lift up** the Tabernacle.

It seems as if the text wants us to perceive some kind of connection between counting and appointing and between counting and lifting. So let's ponder that together: How might appointing and lifting, respectively, be conceptually connected to… counting?

How Counting Matters

Let's start with **נשא**, the word that means alternately "to count" or "to lift up." Consider the following verse, which seems to be instructive:

שְׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל

Count the heads of all the congregation of the Children of Israel.

Numbers 1:2

Perhaps the verse doesn't just mean "count the heads" of the Children of Israel. It could also be translated as "lift up the heads of the Children of Israel." And maybe, indeed, the two ideas are connected. That is, perhaps God's counting the people has something to do with lifting up their heads. In other words, it seems that there's something affirming about God having us counted. It's almost like, through the act of counting, someone who previously felt downcast is now able to hold their head high.[1]

To Count and to Be Entrusted

And now let's talk about that other Hebrew word for counting, פקד. Besides meaning "to count," *pakad* also means to "**appoint**" or "**entrust**" with some sort of mission or task. In fact, the related Hebrew word פיקדון, *pikadon*, denotes an object that is entrusted for safekeeping. In a way, when you are appointed to carry out some sort of responsibility, you've been entrusted with a kind of *pikadon* to watch over, to safeguard. Someone

1 Interestingly, it isn't just in Hebrew that the word "count" holds such connotations. If we take the English phrase "to count," we find that it, too, has a similar double meaning. On the one hand, "to count" means to take stock of things numerically. But the other meaning of "to count" is inextricably tied to self-worth. When someone feels like they *count*, they feel like they matter, like their existence is meaningful for the world.

else is now counting on you, is trusting you, to do the task they need done — and it is yours to do for them.

I wonder if these secondary meanings of *pakad* and *nasa* — entrust and lift up — somehow connect with one another to give us a better sense of why being counted by God can be seen as an act of love. Counting is something you do when you enumerate the individuals in a larger community, of which each is a part. In a way, being counted by God's command perhaps affirms the place that each individual has in that community. Indeed, we might well say: *When can I "lift up my head"* (*nasa*)? *When I find myself "entrusted"* (*pakad*). When I play a unique role in a community, when I am charged with carrying out a piece of a shared mission much larger than myself, I really *do* feel like I count. When, on the other hand, I live only for my own self-preservation, what's really the point?

Community and Meaning

The relationship between the individual and the community, however, does not always recognize the value of the individual. This special combination of *pakad* and *nasa* that we've been talking about is unique to communities that somehow manage to celebrate the individual, even as they organize themselves to achieve noble tasks no individual could possibly achieve on their own. But that kind of relationship between one and many can't be taken for granted. One might imagine two other kinds of relationships between the individual and the community, each of which fails by veering dangerously toward one extreme or the other.

At one end: What if a community has a sense of cohesion that is so dramatic, so pronounced, that it squashes all sense of individuality among its members? Totalitarianism can create faceless communities. There remains no room for individuality in a community that swallows everything.

At the opposite extreme, one can imagine enthroning the role of the rugged individual so profoundly that individuals living in proximity to one another, who comprise a neighborhood, a city, or even a nation, never really cohere to form a group in a meaningful way. Sure, they may share a common postal code. But they are really nothing more than a whole bunch of people living near each other. There is no sense of shared "why"; no sense that I am contributing to a well-articulated, or even implicitly clear, overarching goal or set of principles. This is another kind of failed community.

What we aim to be a part of is the "*nasa* riding on *pakad*" sweet spot: a model of community wherein an individual can find a real sense of sustaining meaning, without getting squashed; a community in which each individual can become deeply part of something larger than him- or herself. In this third model, not only do we have a group that is pledged to some overarching, noble ideal, but the individuals who comprise the group have carved out what we might call a carefully crafted dual identity. Each person, we might say, is both an individual and a part of a community that transcends them. Each person has a vital role to play in actualizing the mission of the whole.

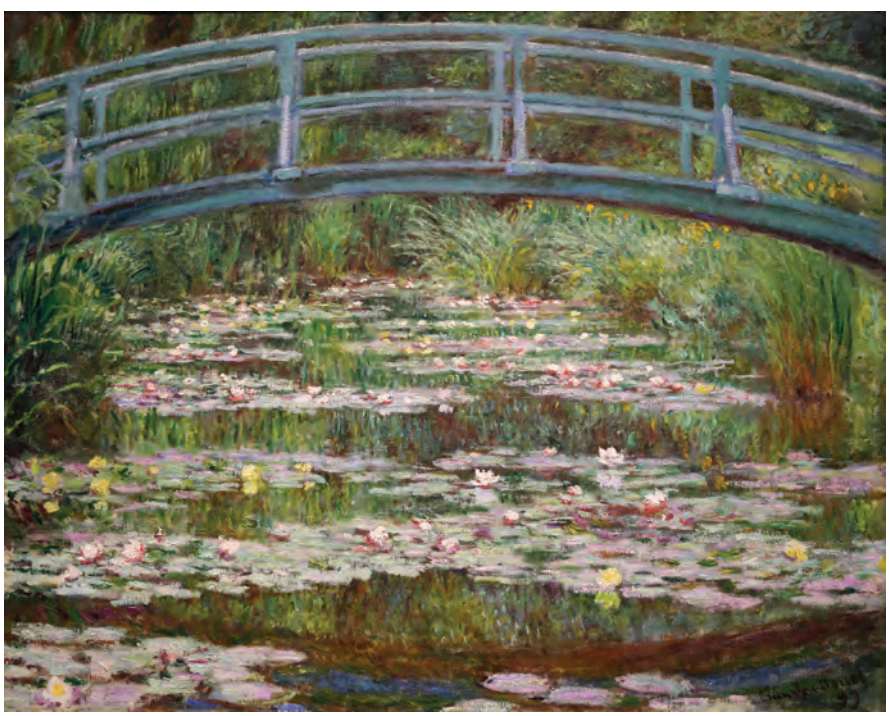
Three Painters: Pollock, Monet, and Seurat

I promised you we'd look at this question of "meaning" in the context of Pollock, Monet, and Seurat, and now we've finally arrived at the point where we can do that, looking at the styles of these three painters as symbols representing the three different interactions between individual and community that we outlined above.

Take a look at any painting by Jackson Pollock. Every individual element within the painting is recognizable, but there's no sense that it's coming together in any way that makes this painting a cohesive whole. I'll add a bit of a caveat here: To my untrained eye, his paintings seem random. Perhaps some art connoisseurs will see things differently. But I imagine there are plenty of respected art critics who see randomness and

disconnection as the whole point of a Jackson Pollock painting. One way or the other, for the purpose of my illustration here, let's call a Jackson Pollock painting a pictorial version of one of those failed communities we were talking about, where each individual is present but the group is bereft of a real sense of shared purpose.

At the other extreme, take a painter like Claude Monet, one of the early giants of the Impressionist movement. In any Monet painting, you get the sense you're looking at a very beautiful scene. But that's true only when you stand back and look at the painting as a whole. When you stand up close and try to identify the individual elements in the painting, you find that, astonishingly, they're not really there. When viewed from afar, the work gives the viewer the impression of a crowd of a bridge over flowers, but upon closer inspection, it just looks like broad, indistinguishable brushstrokes of paint. There is no individually carved-out identity; there is merely an impression (hence, the name for this style of art: Impressionist). Monet's paintings offer a pictorial representation of one of the failed communities we talked about above: the community that swallows the individual and leaves him or her without any distinguishing identity at all.



But then there's a middle path, where whole and part live in careful, balanced tension with one another. Welcome to the work of Georges Seurat, the painter who founded the technique of Pointillism. When you look at Seurat's paintings from afar, you can discern a grand scheme. It all comes together. But in his work, the grand scheme does not require the sacrifice of the individual. If you zoom in on a Seurat painting, you will find that, even at the most detailed level, not only does the individual exist, but every little mark of paint is its own individual dot. In a Seurat painting, the painting works because the dots come together to make something grand. All dots "count." All find themselves entrusted with the sacred purpose of the whole.

From Painting to Biology

It's not just in human societies that this middle path indicates a kind of flourishing. Something like this middle of the road sweet spot in the relationship between one and many seems to happen at the biological level as well, with the cells that make up our body. For on the one hand, each of our cells is self-sufficient, containing everything it needs to function: a cell membrane to keep it together, mitochondria to produce energy, and lysosomes to get rid of waste. But each of these almost infinitesimally small cells is no Marlboro Man, operating on its own with no connection

to community. Rather, each cell is entrusted with a larger mission. Each has a role in supporting the function of the organs, which in turn support the workings of the body. Emblematic of this truth is what's contained in the tiniest little center of that cell — the nucleus, in which resides a DNA blueprint so detailed, wondrous, and complete that it can be used as a schematic from which to construct the entire body to which the cell belongs, with all its billions of differentiated cells. As much as the human cell is an individual being, entrusted with a role that may seem almost miniscule, it also, in some visceral way, shares deeply in the vision and mission of the whole.

What is it like to be part of the "Seurat" kind of community — the community where individuality is prized, and communal purpose is sacred? It is a deep privilege to be included — by God, no less, through a divinely ordained act of counting — in such a community. The act of counting that symbolizes the individual being entrusted with a larger purpose is truly an act of love.

In God's counting, and in the implicit stewardship that it engenders, we find a connection to a larger meaning that would be impossible to attain as a mere individual. In being counted by the Divine, we find that we truly *do* count.