

TORAH MIETZION

New Readings in Tanach

BEMIDBAR

EDITOR

Rav Ezra Bick

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Parashat Bemidbar

From Generation to Generation

Dr. Yael Ziegler

I. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

The Book of Numbers is a book of transition. It tells of one generation's failure to enter the Land of Israel, and of the next generation's success. The critical question is why the first generation fails. The standard answer is that the pessimistic report brought back by the spies indicated a lack of faith in God. Nevertheless, the real question remains: What triggered this type of report? This generation witnessed the great events of the Exodus from Egypt: the ten plagues and the splitting of the sea. Why did the spies exhibit such meager faith?

The reciprocal question is equally puzzling: Why is the second generation deemed worthy of entering the land? After all, the second generation complains and sins too (Num. 20:2–4, 10–13; 21:4–9; 25:1–9). To address these questions, we must examine the structure of Numbers.

Numbers is divided into two generations and three parts. The story of the generation that left Egypt spans nineteen chapters. The story of the second generation is told in chapters 20–36. The first section can be further subdivided to sketch two very different portraits of the generation that left Egypt.

1. Chapters 1–10

Chapters 1–10 record events which take place in the second year after the Jews' departure from Egypt. Overall, the people occupy themselves with the organization of the camp: the census of its adult male population, the separate census of the Levite population, and the structure of the tribes around the *Mishkan*. All of this is undertaken in preparation for the impending advance towards the Land of Israel.

One compelling indication that these chapters should be seen as a discrete sub-unit is that they are bracketed off by an *inclusio*, a literary device which creates a frame by placing similar material (words, phrases, or themes) at the beginning and end of the section.

The unit begins with the arrangement of the camp, including:

- date – the first day of the second month of the second year (Num. 1:1);
- place – the Sinai Desert (1:1);
- listing of the princes by name (1:5–15);
- census of the tribes followed by their organization into tribal groupings (1:20–43; 2:1–31).

The unit ends with the movement of the camp, including:

- date – the twentieth day of the second month of the second year (10:11);
- place – the Sinai Desert (10:12);
- listing of the princes by name (10:14–27);
- travel according to tribal groupings (10:14–27).

The goal articulated at the beginning of the section is successfully implemented at the end of the section. The objective, of course, is to move the camp from the Sinai Desert to the Land of Israel, in anticipation of the conquest of the land. The section ends on a dynamic note, with the beginning of the journey, and a guarantee of assured victory as the Ark is dispatched by Moses to vanquish the enemies.

The nation travels and encamps in accordance with the word of God (9:18, 20, 23), observing God's mandate according to His word

which He has given Moses (9:23). Harmony between God, leader, and nation holds sway as the entire camp surges forward, eager to embark upon this final leg of their movement towards national autonomy. This positive outlook is particularly evinced by the significant recurrence (five times in the span of four verses) of the word *tov*, good, as Moses tries to convince Hovav to accompany the Israelites on their divinely inspired expedition (10:29–32).

2. Chapters 11–19

It is evident from the start that these chapters diverge from the tone and mood set by the previous section. Instead of the *tov* which resonates at the end of the first section, this section opens with *ra*, evil, a word which echoes and mocks the previous *tov*. The word *ra* is woven with conscious artistry throughout the beginning section, appearing plainly four times (11:1, 10, 11, 15), and many additional times in various plays on the word *ra*, involving consonants which recall the sound of the word (*tavera*, *baara*, *hara*). These initial appearances of the word *ra* set the tone for the complaint-filled section of Numbers.

Chapters 11–19 chronicle a series of complaints, verging on mutiny, by the people and the junior leadership. Even more shockingly, in the opening episode, Moses attempts to abdicate in misery and frustration. The recurring episodes of complaints, transgressions, and cracks in the leadership climax in the story of the spies, which in turn leads to the momentous decree that this generation will not enter the Land of Israel.

3. Chapters 20–36

This section depicts the death of those who led the Israelites out of Egypt, the last survivors of the first generation. It picks up the narrative thread in the fortieth year in the desert, in anticipation of the impending conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel.

The structure sketched above sheds light on the meaning of each of the three sections of the book. Leaving aside for a moment the striking (and baffling) shift in mood between sections 1 and 2, I would like to focus for a moment on the connection between sections 1 and 3. Just

as the frustrated aim of the first section (chapters 1–10) is to propel the first generation towards the Land of Israel, the third section (chapters 20–36) leads the next generation to the same objective.

There are several striking similarities between the descriptions of each generation's preparation for entrance into the land. Perhaps the most prominent parallel between the two sections is the eponymous census in chapters 1 and 26, which provides the rabbinic name for the book, *Humash HaPekudim*, or the *Book of Counting* (Numbers in colloquial translations).

Both sections 1 and 3 also have a separate census of the tribe of Levi (3–4; 26:57–62), marked by a verse declaring the explicit exclusion of the Levites from the national census (1:47; 2:33; 26:62). Other salient correspondences include a statement inaugurating the nation's travels with the words *eleh masei*, "These are the journeys" (10:28; 33:1), and incorporating several movements marked by the word *vayis'u*, "and they traveled" (10:12–13; 33:1–49). The list of the journeys of the second generation is much more detailed than that of the first, involving many more stations and peregrinations. Finally, the catalogue of named princes, one from each tribe, already noted in section 1, appears again in full in the third section (34:16–29).

None of these recurrences is surprising; the reappearance of the census, the travels, and the inventory of the tribal leaders all make sense. Each time the Children of Israel prepare for entrance into the Land of Israel, they tally their numbers, organize themselves into tribal units, and embark upon their journey.

However, there are important differences between these sections. These discrepancies reflect the fundamental differences between the first generation and the second, and examining them will illuminate the reasons that the first generation was denied entry into the land.

II. THE FIRST GENERATION

To illustrate the character of the first generation, let us examine the topics which retain parallels in the third section (national census, Levite exclusion, travels, and princes). It seems self-evident that the general function of the census of adult males in chapter 1 is military in nature (see Rashbam, *Bemidbar* 1:2). Indeed, this census is peppered with the recurring phrase *kol yotzei tzava*, "all who go out to war." The headcount

of fighters naturally does not include the tribe of Levi, who do not take part in combat (see Rashbam 1:47). Nevertheless, the tribe of Levi is still considered an active participant in war, as evidenced by the phrase woven into the census of the Levite adult males, *kol haba latzava*, “all who come to the army” (4:3, 23, 35, 39). The Levites do their share by serving God in the *Mishkan* (see Ibn Ezra 1:50).

The presentation of the tribal princes likewise exhibits a military objective. Every military battalion has a chain of command; the army is divided into subordinate units, each of which has a commanding officer. This seems to be the purpose of appointing tribal leaders in chapter 1. Immediately following God’s command to count the adult men for warfare (1:3), Moses and Aaron are instructed to appoint one man from each tribe to assist them, presumably in warfare. Ibn Ezra specifies that the princes serve as generals for their tribes (*ki yesh sar le’elef*, “for there is a general for every thousand,” Ibn Ezra 1:16). This section concludes with a description of the travels of Israel and steers the narrative unit to its climax – a description of the Ark traveling before the people as an advance military guard, scattering their enemies (10:35–36).

It seems fairly clear, then, that the purpose of section 1 is military in nature. The Children of Israel prepare for the upcoming conquest.¹

The emphasis on military preparation addresses the nation’s inherent weakness at this delicate juncture. Despite the extraordinary miracles they have experienced, they have never fought a war against a settled people. Organizing a group of recently emancipated slaves into a viable army is difficult. Yet in examining the description of preparations for battle, we can discern an undercurrent that counters the message of military preparedness. The nation must also recognize and embrace its reliance upon God in the upcoming battles. The dependence of the Children of Israel is evident in the role of the Ark. Its presence at the vanguard of the camp indicates the presence of God in the army and His central role in every triumph. This is likewise the message underlying the parallel tallies of soldiers, *kol haba latzava*, and Levites, the keepers of the *Mishkan*. The Torah suggests complementary roles; military

1. See the following article by Rav Chanoch Waxman for a dissenting view of the nature of the first census.

victory ensues only if the Levites properly serve God as part of the military effort. Cultivating the nation's dependence upon God is paramount.

Despite the promptings of this first section, this generation proves itself incapable of placing absolute trust in God. We can discern the first hints of the nation's shortcomings in the formulation of their desire for meat: "Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish which we ate for free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the watermelon, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic" (11:4–5). The nostalgic words of the Children of Israel contain a peculiar inaccuracy, already noted by Rashi. How is it possible to describe food obtained through slavery and hard labor as "free"? Rashi's proposed resolution is succinct and instructive: "free from commandments." The Children of Israel were accustomed to obtaining food based on predictable criteria; they work and they receive food. To this nation of former slaves, freedom means being unfettered by obligations to an amorphous and demanding God. This is primarily why they dislike the manna, for its arrival depends on God's benevolence. This generation is not inclined to depend upon God for survival; they prefer to rely on labor and its reliable recompense.

Skipping ahead, we note a similar attitude in the sin of the spies. What, after all, do the spies do wrong? In response to Moses' guiding questions, they simply offer a truthful account of what they saw. Their conclusion is unequivocal: *Lo nukhal laalot*, "We cannot go up [and fight]," for they are too strong for us! The spies' assessment is guided by a realistic military appraisal, not by faith in God. Their words make clear that they fundamentally misunderstand, or choose to misunderstand, God's active role in conquering the land.

The refusal to acknowledge God's decisive role in their upcoming battle disqualifies this generation from entering the land. The attempt to prepare them for war (in section 1) fails. They do not trust in God enough to establish a relationship of dependence upon Him, and hence, they cannot enter the Land of Israel. Israel is a land where survival (agricultural as well as military) depends completely on trust in God. This is, of course, the underlying message of many verses in the Torah, including the second paragraph of the *Shema*, which states unequivocally that agricultural success depends upon obedience to God's command (Deut. 11:13–17).

The conclusion seems inevitable: this generation cannot be allowed to enter a land in which God's Divine Presence dictates the people's survival. Only the next generation, whose capacity for developing a dependent relationship upon God has not been impaired by years of slavery, can possibly inherit the land.

III. THE SECOND GENERATION

The final section of Numbers (chapters 20–36) picks up the narrative of the first section, but now it is the fortieth year; the nation is poised (once again) to enter the Land of Israel. This generation differs from the former one. They never experienced slavery, having grown in the desert, alongside the *Ohel Mo'ed* and the pillar of fire. They ate manna every day and experienced God's omnipotence, nurturing, and care for forty years. Dependence upon God is effortless for them; they have never known anything but dependence.

To illustrate the character of this generation's preparation to enter Israel, let us examine the topics that appear in both the first and third sections: national census, Levite exclusion, travels, and princes. Since it seemed clear that the census in chapter 1 had a military objective, we would expect the second census to have the same purpose as well. Unexpectedly, however, the phrase *kol yotzei tzava*, which was so prominent in the first census, appears only once at the beginning of this second census (26:2). In fact, it is not certain that the second census has a military objective at all. The conclusion of the census points to a distinctly different goal. *La'eleh tehalek haaretz benaḥala bemispar shemot*, "to these you shall partition the land into its inheritances, according to this tally of names" (26:53). This census focuses on matters of inheritance rather than military formation.

The rationale for maintaining a separate census for the Levites reveals a similar purpose, delineated explicitly in the narrative: "for they were not given an inheritance among the Children of Israel" (26:62). The exclusion of the Levites is not due to their military exemption, but rather due to their status as a landless tribe. Land is apportioned according to this census; its purpose is settlement, not conquest.

The princes of the second generation are appointed with very clear responsibilities. The princes in the first section likely bear military

responsibilities; the explicit task of the tribal leaders in the second generation is to apportion the land to the people. This assignment is mentioned twice, once in the introduction and once in the conclusion (34:17–18).

Finally, Israel's extensive travels described in chapter 33 seem geared less towards conquest and more towards settlement of the land. Fifty verses of travels culminate in the following directive:

Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: Now that you are crossing the Jordan to the land of Canaan, you shall dispossess the inhabitants of the land ... and you shall possess the land and settle it, for I have given you the land to possess. And you shall apportion the land among your families by lottery; to the many you shall increase their inheritance and to the few you shall decrease their inheritance. (33:51–54)

The emphasis on inheritance and settlement is difficult to miss. Indeed, the word *naḥala*, inheritance, appears four times, as does the word *reshet*, to possess.

To summarize, the major distinction between the two preparatory sections may be defined as follows: If the first generation aspires to military preparation for conquest of the land, the second generation focuses instead on preparation for settlement of the land. Even the unique narratives and commandments in this section revolve around settlement of the land. Consider the following topics found exclusively in this final section of the book, all of which concern themselves with *naḥala*: the narrative of the daughters of Tzlofhad (27:1–11; 36:6–12), the episode involving the settlement of the tribes on the eastern side of the Jordan River (32), the description of the specific borders of the land (34:1–15), and the cities that are to be set aside for the Levites and for cities of refuge (35). Each unit ends with its unique focal point – just as the last few verses of the first section demonstrated that the focus of the section was the military conquest of the land (10:35–36), the last chapter of the third section focuses on *naḥala* (a word which appears no less than seventeen times in the thirteen verses of the final chapter!).

Why does the second generation focus on preparation for settlement? I suggested previously that the first generation had to focus

on military preparation because they needed to develop the sense of dependence upon God so vital for military success. In contrast to the generation of slaves, this second generation was born and bred on the experience of total dependence upon God, an experience which resulted in complete trust in God's abilities and promises. Indeed, the second generation seems almost oblivious to any sort of preparation for conquest. Military exploits come easily to them; if God says to fight, they fight. The nation engages in several wars without displaying any concern whatsoever – wars against Sihon (21:21–30), Og (21:32–35), and Midian (31). Perhaps the most poignant example of their confidence in God's military power is in their response to the captives taken by the Canaanites (21:1). Instead of crying and bemoaning their dismal situation, they simply take a vow to God, promising that they will fulfill certain conditions if He gives them victory. This measured reaction reflects their attitude towards the upcoming war. The impending conquest of the land of Canaan simply does not faze them (32:32) because they are filled with the utter certainty that God will fight on their behalf.

This generation may not fear conquest, but they have their weakness as well. The challenge for this generation is exactly the opposite of the challenge of the first generation. This is a generation that has lived with the security of God's presence in their midst, with manna on their doorstep every morning, and with powerful leaders who take care of their every need. Their difficulty lies not in dependence but in independence.

The second generation has to learn not to depend solely on God and miracles. They need to learn to live without the manna. They must settle the land, which means retiring to their individual portions, building houses and families, and ultimately, a relationship with God.

Our careful look at the structure of the Book of Numbers yields two critical observations. First, it offers a sharper understanding of the weakness of the first generation and its subsequent failure. Second, it clarifies the weak point of the second generation and prefaces the challenges they will face in settling the Land of Israel