Darshan Yeshiva

Notes for Parsha Bamidbar; Numbers 1:1 – 4:20

This parsha has two separate sections: the first deals with the setting, the first census, the arrangement of the camp and the order of the tribes for marching. The second half of this parsha deals with the lines of Moses and Aaron along with the regulation of priestly duties to the Levite tribes and an accounting of their numbers.

The time in which the book begins is the second day of the second month in the second year following the exodus from Egypt. The text then shifts as God tells Moses to take a census of the entire Israelite community which is to be organized according to the ancestral houses and listing the names of each male. The census is to include all males from the age of 20 upwards. The purpose of this census is to determine how many men are available to bear arms and participate in an army.

This idea of taking a census is one of the key concepts in this parsha and indeed, this entire book. In fact, this census is one of many which will occur through the entire book and when the sages asked why this was, they found their answer in the midrash, Numbers Rabbah 2:19. Here, the sages determined that just as a king will sit in his counting house and count his amazing treasure to be sure none is lost, God loves to count his treasure – his people – to be sure none are lost. Each time God counts his people, God says, "I have created the magnificent stars of the universe, yet it is Israel who will do My Will."

The instruction to take the census is then followed by lists of names, sorted according to the Twelve Tribes, along with the number enrolled from each tribe. Even though these are the numbers given to us in the Torah, there are scholars who believe the actual figures to be far less based upon the translation of the Hebrew word, "*alef.*" Translated in a variety places as "thousand," it is possible that this was not such a precise translation in the past. The word, "*revavot*," is often understood as "tens of thousands." This means it is possible that the term, "*alef,*" may also have been an indefinite term, perhaps a tribal unit representing a value far less than a thousand. Scholars believe the word "contingents" to be a better translation.

The tribe of Reuven: 46,000
The tribe of Gad: 45,650
The tribe of Issachar: 54,400
The tribe of Ephraim: 40,500
The tribe of Benjamin: 35,400
The tribe of Asher: 41,500
The tribe of Simeon: 59,300
The tribe of Judah: 74,600
The tribe of Zebulun: 57,400
The tribe of Manasseh: 32,200
The tribe of Dan: 62,700
The tribe of Naphtali: 53,400

The only tribe not listed is the Levites because they were in charge of the Tabernacle and everything contained within. Joseph is listed through his two sons as two separate tribes: Ephraim and Manasseh.

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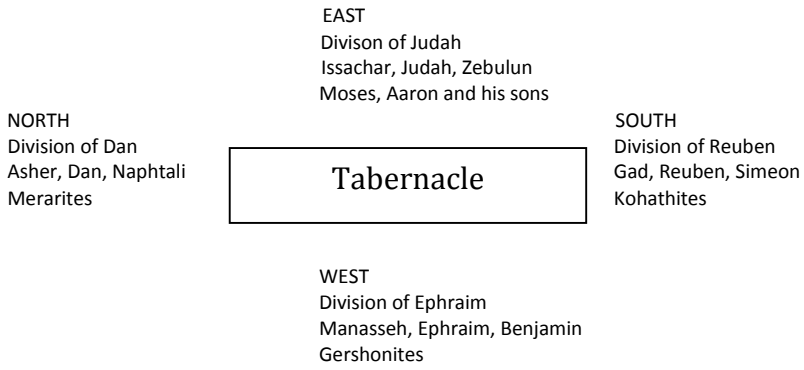
Next, we are told that the Tribes are to camp under their standard and ancestral banners around the Tent of Meeting. In the W. Gunther Plaut edition of the Torah,[1] there is a chart showing their locations as follows:



The second half of this parsha, Chapter 3:1 – 4:20 details the composition and duties of the priestly tribes. The tribe mentioned is Aaron and his sons followed by the remainder of the Levites. Finally we learn of the first-born of the Israelites, who are also assigned to Temple service. We also learn that these sons can be redeemed from their service by a ceremony known as Pidyon haben – redemption of the firstborn, a tradition still carried on today, especially in Orthodox communities. Originally the ceremony included a special offering. Today, however, a donation to the local Temple or a tzedakah organization suffices. According to the Torah, the redemption price was five shekels per head according to sanctuary weight with is just under half an ounce of silver.

We learn that the Levites were assigned to attend upon Aaron hakohein – the priest to serve him. Assigned to serve the Levities were the first born of the Israelites who were not redeemed. This hierarchy – kohein, Levi, Israelite has survived into modern times in a variety of observances; most notably in being called to the bima for an Aliyah.

In the listing of Aaron and his sons, Nadav and Avihu are mentioned along with their deaths for having offered alien fire in the wilderness of Sinai, leaving so sons. Therefore Aaron's sons who served as priests during Aaron's lifetime where Eleazar and Ithamar.

The parsha ends with the work of dismantling the Tabernacle and the Tent of Meeting with descriptions of covering various items with crimson and blue cloths as well as dolphin skins which may have been used because they were waterproof. This job was assigned to Aaron and his sons and the Kohathites as these were the most sacred objects.

The teaching here is how carefully sacred objects are tended to which is in contrast to our modern world. We like to tear the mystery away from everything and many of us have very little reverence for things that belong to God. A. G. Butzer teaches that, "Reverence for the things of God must be given a relevance to the things of men, until the sacred puts a halo around the secular."[2]

[1] Plaut, W. Gunther, Ed., The Torah; A Modern Commentary, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, New York, 1981, p1027
[2] Interpreter's Bible (12 vols., New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), Vol. II, pp. 159-60
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