

## Numbers in the Wilderness

This week we begin the book *Bamidbar*. The book has two English names. In the Wilderness is a literal translation of *Bamidbar*, which occurs in the first verse of the book: *And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai....* The name *Numbers* comes from the second verse, in which Moses is instructed to take a census “b’mispar sh’mot kol zachar” (according to the number of the names of every male). This census is the first of many enumerations in *Bamidbar*. Things that are counted include: people, oxen, bullocks, goats, sheep, golden pans, and silver basins. Those of us who read Torah are familiar with the almost hypnotic lists of sacrifices listed tribe by tribe, so that by learning one aliyah, you can actually read four or five. There are so many enumerations that the Mishnah refers to *Bamidbar* as *Sefer HaPikudim*: The Book of Countings.

But the two enumerations that seem to stand out to scholars are the two censuses: one of the beginning of the book and one near the end. In Ch. 1, in the wilderness of Sinai, Moses counts all the males over the age of 20 years or older. In Ch. 25, when the Israelites are assembled on the plains of Moab, Moses again counts the people as they wait to enter the land of Israel. But the descriptions of the two countings are very different. In the census at Sinai, it says (Ch. 1 v 18) “and they assembled the congregation...and they declared their pedigrees after their families, by their fathers’ houses...” In the census at Sinai, what counted was your past: your heritage was what gave you your place in the community. At the beginning of the census at Moab, Moses instructs Eleazar the priest to count all the people “who are ready to go up and fight in Israel.” And at the end of the counting, Moses says “Unto these, the land shall be divided up for an inheritance according to the number of names.” What is important in the second census is the future. You needed to count people in order to help figure out what will happen when enter the land, and how the land will be apportioned to that everyone can be supported by his or her share of it.

This move from past-oriented to future oriented in *Bamidbar* is really a compressed version of the trajectory of the whole five books of the Torah. In *Breshit*, the foundation of the past is laid down. Abraham and Sarah establish a dynasty meant to far into the future. But because *Breshit* is focused on heritage and pedigree, the future is nebulous. All Abraham can be told is that his

descendants will be as numerous as the stars. In *Shmot*, the past is lost. By verse 8 of ch. 1, a Pharaoh comes who knows not Joseph. All traces of the patriarchs disappear. Eight verses later, Pharaoh instructs the midwives to kill all the Israelite male babies, and the Jews are cut off from the future. All they have is a long, bleak, present of enslavement and hard labor. When they leave Egypt, even into their first year of wandering, their main occupations are all present-oriented: establishing a government, making laws, building a tabernacle.

It is in their second year of wandering, in *Bamidbar*, in the wilderness, that the children of Israel acquire a future. They assemble into tribes and encamp in an order that stresses tribal unity. They establish a calendar of recurring festivals to celebrate year after year. They look forward to their inheritance, so much so that the daughters of Zelophahad request of Moses that they not be left out. And now, instead of a vague “numberless as the stars,” we can have an exact counting of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Once our future is countable it becomes real.

One of the changes that pushed the Israelites from a present to a future orientation was a physical change in the people. Ch. 26 v. 63 and 64 point out that “But among (those that were numbered by Moses and Eleazar the priest) at Moab, there were not a man of them numbered by Moses and Aaron the priest who were numbered the children of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai.” The old, present-bound people had died out, leaving the way for more future-oriented Israelites. But what helped make that change was the wilderness itself. The terrors and wonders of the wilderness, the hunger and thirst they endured, and being witness to the natural world away from the urban world of Egypt, help change the children of Israel into people who respect God but rely in themselves. They become people who have a future.

So both names of *Bamidbar* have a place in ensuring that the people of Israel have both a past and a future. The numbers that are counted in the two censuses—one that stresses pedigree and one that stresses inheritance—ensures that the people will have a complete story, that includes where they came from and where they are going. And the experience in the wilderness ensures that their journey will bring them closer to God.