

Parashat Bamidbar

Parsha Summary

In the second month of the second year in the desert, God commands Moshe to count all the members of the nation according to their tribes and families. Each tribe will have a *nasi*, named as charged with counting the members of his tribe. Moshe and Aharon, together with these *nesiim*, counted all the twenty to sixty year old men--all who go into battle--in each tribe and their numbers are given here. The total came to 603,550 battle-ready men. However, God told Moshe not to count the Leviim, because they are entrusted to guard the Mishkan.

God tells Moshe to have the tribes form their encampments into formation around the Mishkan: Yehudah leading Yissachar and Zevulun at front/east, Reuvain leading Shimon and Gad at the south, Ephraim leading Menashe and Binyamin at the west, and Dan leading Asher and Naftali at the north. The Leviim would encamp in the middle, surrounding the Mishkan.

Moshe is told that the Leviim and sons of Aharon will be counted separately, as Aharon and his sons are Kohanim to God and the Leviim are set aside to serve the Kohanim instead of the firstborns who were sanctified in Egypt. All Levite males are counted from the age of one month. The families of each of Levi's three sons are listed, along with their responsibilities in the Mishkan. Gershon's family numbered 7500 and were responsible for the Mishkan's tent coverings and curtains. Kehas' family numbered 8600 and carry the holy vessels. Merari's number was 6200 and they are to carry the beams, pillars etc. The total number of Leviim amounted to 22,000. Moshe and Aharon would camp in front of the Mishkan, that is, to its west.

Moshe was also told to count the firstborns of Israel for the Leviim would take their place and their animals. The firstborns numbered 22,273, so the extra 273 firstborns had to pay to the Kohanim five shekels each to be redeemed. God tells Moshe how the family of Kehat is supposed to cover and pack up the Mishkan so that its holiness is kept secured.

Classic Questions

Why is the nation counted here (in addition to in Sefer Shemos and later in Bamidbar)? Also, how was the total number (603,550) the same as in Shemos 38:26?

- **Rashi:** there is no reason for the count here other than to express God's love for Israel
 - This is the third count: the first was immediately after leaving Egypt, and another after the sin of the calf (but commanded at the beginning of Parashas Ki-Sisa) and here, when God would be resting His presence among the nation (in the form of the Mishkan. Although the Mishkan (the location of God's presence) was built one month earlier,
 - **Maharal:** a person can visit a city for one month before he is considered a resident
 - **Kli Yakar:** there was first a month long "wedding" celebrating the Mishkan's erection
 - Men were considered adults not by birthdays, but by the calendar year, which is why the number here is identical to the one at the end of Parashas Vayakhel
 - The count was needed because God was going to rest His presence among the nation.
- **Ramban:** the reason for the count here was to prepare for battle to conquer the land
 - The counts are identical to the first count because (1) the number of men who turned 20 equalled those who died or passed 60 years old, or (2) the Leviim were counted the first time but not here, so new people replaced them
- **R. Bechor Shor:** there was only one single count which the Torah referenced in multiple instances
- **Ralbag, many:** the identical numbers was due to God's miraculous maintenance of the demographics
- **Netziv:** the first count determined how many men would be needed to enter the land, and now once the quota was reached there was no need to continue counting further

What is the order of the count in “the second month” (1:1), the Mishkan’s completion (7:1) and the Pesach celebration in “the first month” (9:1)? If these are out of order, why?

- **Rashi:** the stories are not in order, but Bamidbar begins with the second month because the story of the first month reflect badly on Israel (that they only offering one Pesach during their forty year journey)
- **Ramban:** the first chapters are a supplement to Sefer Vayikra which deal with the setting up of the Mishkan, so they are written before continuing the story of Israel in the desert
- **Abarbanel:** the verses are in order: the *nesiim*’s gift-giving was not immediately upon completion of the Mishkan, but at the end of that process, during the second month
 - The opening of 9:1 “in the first month” is just to provide context for a story that is really occurring in the second month: the Pesach Sheni

Why are there so few Leviim compared to the other tribes?

- **Rashi:** they were often killed (as punishment) for not treating the Aron properly
- **Ramban 1:** because the Egyptians did not subject them to harsh labor, they didn’t proliferate at the huge growth rates of the other tribes
- **Ramban 2:** Levi’s “anger” that Yaakov cursed on his deathbed limited their growth
- **MiShulchano shel Beis haLevi:** because they rely on charity from the other tribes, God ensured that they would not be so populous as to be a significant burden on the nation
- **Netziv 1:** they were scrupulous about mitzvos in Egypt, before the giving of the Torah
- **Netziv 2:** like a “more precious tree,” they took more generations to blossom

Selected “Chazal”s and “Rashi”s

- Why did God count the nation now, in the second month of the second year? To show His love for them, and that now He would be causing His Presence to dwell amongst them (Rashi)
- “Flags” were arranged with three tribes to each flag and colors according to the tribes’ corresponding stone on the Choshen and images relating to Yaakov’s blessing (Rashi)
- “These are the descendents of Aharon and Moshe” (3:1) [but only Aharon’s sons are listed] to teach us that one who has taught his friend’s son Torah is as if he had fathered them (Sanhedrin 19b)
- “A stranger who comes near will die,” (3:38) includes anyone ‘strange’ to a particular service, so from here [we learn that] a gate-guard who sings or a singer who gate-guards deserves death (Arakhin 11b)
- Moshe said to God, “how can I go into the tents of the Leviim to know how many infants are there [as it would be a breach of modesty]?” God said, “you do your part and I’ll do mine,” and when Moshe came to the Levi’s tent, a voice rang out announcing how many children were inside; thus they were counted “by word of God” (Rashi)
- The Leviim numbered 22,000 even though the sum of each family’s count is 22,300 because those 300 were themselves firstborns and were therefore not included in the final total of Leviim (Bechoros 5a)

A Short Vort

The formation of Israel’s encampment and travel formation is described in great detail, but the overarching theme is obvious: it is God’s presence that is in their center - not at the front, as if separate from them. Rabbeinu Bachayei notes that there is one *nasi* in each of the four directions with a name ending in “-el.” This drives home the message that Israel was not just meant to follow God as He led from the front, so to speak, but God was present in their midst, throughout the entire camp. “God dwelling amongst the people” referred not only to the fact that the Mishkan was in the physical center, but that the tents throughout all the Israelite homes were suffused with the *Shekhinah*.

Parashas Naso

Parsha Summary

After Kehas, God explains to Moshe the task of the family of Gershon in carrying the Mishkan's curtains, and that of Merari who carry the beams, all under the aegis of Isamar son of Aharon. The men from Merari and Gershon's families are counted from the age of thirty. God tells Moshe to have the *tamei* members of the nation leave the camp.

Here, several laws are taught: something taken from a fellow man must be returned and a sacrifice brought; if it cannot be returned because the owner has died without heirs it should be given to the Kohen. A woman whose husband suspects her of infidelity should be brought to the Mishkan, where she will bring a meal-offering and drink 'bitter/cursed waters' which will cause her to die if she was unfaithful. A man or woman can decide to become a *nazir*, swearing off wine, haircutting, and coming in contact with the dead for a set period of time. If he violates the terms of the *nazir*, or when his time is completed, he must bring two birds and a lamb as a sacrifice and begin the days over again. Once his time of *nezirus* has ended, he must sacrifice three sheep (a male lamb, a female lamb, and an adult ram) together with baskets of bread with oil. The kohen shaves the *nazir's* hair, has him drink wine, and takes parts of the sacrifice for waving together with the *nazir*.

God tells Moshe to teach Aharon and his sons how to bless the people. The Mishkan is set up, and the twelve *nesiim* offer gifts of wagons to assist the families of Gershon and Merari with their tasks of carrying the Mishkan, as well as gifts of gold, silver, spices, and sacrifices. God tells Moshe to have each *nasi* offer his sacrifice one day at a time, for twelve days of sacrificial gifts. Each *nasi* and his gift are listed here separately [but they were all identical to each other].

Classic Questions

When (and why) were the Leviim chosen to serve in the Mikdash?

- **Pirkei dRebi Eliezer** (Ch 36): Yaakov separated Levi as a son to be dedicated to God
 - **Targum Y (Ber. 32:35)** implies that this is reward for saving Dinah from Shechem
- **Rashi (and most)**: the Leviim were chosen to replace the firstborns as those who would serve in the Mikdash after they were the only tribe to be uninvolved in the golden calf
 - **Ramban, Abarbanel**: Aharon (and his sons?) were chosen as kohanim even before the golden calf, but the entire tribe of Levi was separated after that sin
 - **Kli Yakar** (Shemos 28:1): although Aharon himself was also guilty of worshiping the golden calf, Moshe successfully prayed on his behalf
- **Bechor Shor** (3:13, 8:19): God wanted the service to be confined to a tribe so that the laws could be passed from father to son
 - **Ralbag** (Dev. 10:8): the Levites were chosen together with Aharon, who was found to be worthy as an individual to be someone fit to have a family of priests
 - **Seforno (Kavanas haTorah)**: no centralized Mishkan or obligatory sacrifices were needed until after the sin of the calf, and so beforehand there was no need for priests

Is becoming a *nazir* positive or frowned upon? Why must he bring a sin-offering at the end?

- **Rambam:** although the *nazir* might have proper intentions, he must bring a sin-offering for veering off the path of the 'golden mean' and going to extremes in his asceticism
 - **Meshech Chochmah:** it is worthy to become a *nazir* for one who needs it, the way a sick person might need to take medications, but the true will of the Torah is to take part in the pleasures of this world with moderation
- **Ramban:** the *nazir* becomes holy, so when he ends his period of holiness he is sinning
- **Seforno:** this is the most appropriate way of devoting oneself entirely to God: the *nazir* does not fast excessively or cause himself pain, merely abstains from over-indulgences
- **Ohr haChayim:** the Gemara indicates that while some have proper motivations when becoming a *nazir*, and in those cases it is desirable, many people do so inappropriately
- **Kli Yakar:** the *nazir's* "sin" is that he should have been able to limit his engagement with the world without having to resort to an oath, which is at risk of being violated

Why would the Torah detail the gifts of each *nasi* even though they are all the same?

- **Ramban 1:** to show how dear these donations were to God
 - **R. Simcha Zissel:** to teach that even though people do the same mitzvah, each person is dear to God as if he were the only one performing the mitzvah
- **Ramban 2:** each individual *nasi* had different intentions for the donation's symbolisms
- **Apiryon:** the Torah honors each *nasi* individually because each of them on their own concluded that this was the appropriate for themselves (as indicated in Midrash Rabbah)
- **Chofetz Chaim:** to emphasize that none of the *nesiim* thought to outdo one another

Important "Chazal"s and "Rashi"s

- "So they did," (5:4) teaches that the *tamei* people did not protest having to leave (Sifrei)
- Who among Israel has no heirs? The verse is speaking of a convert (Bava Kama 109a)
- Said Reish Lakish, a person does not sin unless a spirit of derangement enters him, as it says "any man whose wife strays [*tisteh*," becomes deranged] (Sotah 3a)
- In order to make peace between man and his wife, God decreed to have His name be erased by water, to make peace for the world all the more so (Sukkah 53a)
- One who sees a *sotah* in her disgrace should be a *nazir* to abstain from wine (Nazir 3a)

A Short Vort

In describing the procedure for ending *nezirus* status, the Torah states that the kohen must give "the *nazir* to drink wine." The Alshich points out that by this point, he is no longer a *nazir* - if he were, drinking wine would be prohibited! Nevertheless the Torah still refers to him as a *nazir* because the sanctified experience of living in a more restricted fashion should continue even after that experience has ended; the period of *nezirus* must leave a lasting impression on a person even after the time of actual *nezirus* is over. This is likewise true of any instance of spiritual meaningfulness, whether it be a personal event, holiday, or even Shabbat - that these special times should not just be occasions for feeling temporarily uplifted, but can serve as inspirations for lasting growth.

Parashat BeHa'aloscha

Parsha Summary

God tells Moshe to teach Aharon about lighting the *menorah*'s candles, and then teaches him how to purify the Leviim to dedicate them to God as Israel's messengers and replacements for the firstborn sons.

In the first month of the second year, Israel offered the Pesach sacrifice in the desert. There were people who complained to Moshe that they could not bring the sacrifice because they were impure, and so God told Moshe that anyone who was impure on the 14th of the month can bring a Pesach sacrifice on the 14th of the second month instead.

The camps of Israel would always follow the fiery cloud over the Mishkan; when it would travel the tribes would follow, and when it would rest upon the Mishkan they would encamp. God told Moshe to make golden trumpets to announce the traveling according to the cloud's ascents and to arrange for each section of the tribes to travel in turn. The trumpets were also sounded to gather the leaders as well as over celebratory sacrifices on the holidays. In the second month of the second year, the cloud rose - Moshe sounded the trumpets to have each tribe-group travel one after the other and they went from Sinai to Paran. Moshe told his father-in-law Chovav to travel with them, but he turned to go back home. Israel traveled three days from Sinai with the Aron in front; when it would travel Moshe would announce "arise, God, and your enemies will scatter"

The nation complained and God's anger caused a fire to burn them until Moshe cried out to God; that place was called "*tav'eirah*". The additional members of the nation became desirous and caused a national complaint about their lack of meat and other foods--except for the mann--in the desert. Moshe cried out to God that he cannot handle the nation. God responded that He will give prophecy to 70 elders of the nation to share Moshe's burden, and that the people will be fed a revolting amount of quail for a month. The elders were gathered and two additional people who remained in the camp, Eldad and Meidad, also began prophesying. Yehoshua thought to censure them but Moshe considered this to be positive. God sent the quail, and when the people gathered lustily God was angry and many people died; the place was thus named '*kivros ha-ta'avah*'.

Miriam spoke to Aharon regarding the Kushite woman who Moshe married. God reprimanded them for speaking about Moshe, who was the most faithful and true prophet. Miriam was punished with *tzara'at* and had to remain outside the camp but Moshe prayed for her recovery.

Classic Questions

How is this case of God granting meat to the nation different from the story in Shemos 16:12?

- **Rashi:** [at this point] they really already had meat, and were just looking to complain
- **Ramban 1:** originally, the people never had enough quail to satisfy everyone (so it was either only eaten by the elders of the nation, or it was eaten in small quantities)
- **Ramban 2:** the quail was not given constantly like the mann
- **Chizkuni:** the occasion of the quail in Shemos was only a one-time occurrence
- **R. Yosef Bechor Shor:** this is actually the same story which is referenced earlier

What was the 'slander' that Miriam spoke (and why was she punished)?

- **Targum, Midrash:** Miriam (and Aharon) criticized Moshe for separating from his wife
 - **Rashi:** as they were also prophets but did not separate from their spouses
 - **Ibn Ezra:** Miriam believed that Moshe separated from Tzipporah due to her dark skin color
 - **Rav Kook** (*Olas R'ayah*): the primary sin was not recognizing how Moshe's prophecy was totally unique, a principle of faith and foundation of the Torah
- **Rashbam:** they were speaking of another wife (besides Tzipporah), who Moshe married while he was a king in the land of Kush, as stated in some traditions
 - **R. Yosef Bechor Shor:** they were opposed to Moshe marrying someone who was not a member of Bnei Yisrael
 - **Ibn Caspi:** or perhaps he took another wife later, in addition to Tzipporah

Important "Chazal"s and "Rashi"s

- Here Leviim serve 'from 25 years [of age]' but elsewhere (Bamidbar 4:3) it says thirty, because it took five years to study before serving at age 30 (Rashi)
- Who were the impure people who were defiled by dead bodies? R. Akiva says, they were Mishael and Eltzaphan who buried Nadav and Avihu, R. Yitzchak says they were busy with carrying Yosef's coffin. [Gemara:] they suddenly had to take care of the dead exactly seven days before Pesach. (Sukkah 25b)
- They traveled from Sinai, like a child fleeing from school (Shabbos 116a)
- *Va-yehi bi-nsoa' ha-aron* (10:35) has "signs" before and after to show that this paragraph is out of place. Rabbi says, to show that it is its own book by itself (Shabbos 115b)

A Short Vort

R. Soloveitchik on the story of the parsha:

The Parasha is one story, one tragic story. Expectancy permeates the pages of B'ha'alot'kha; there is a mood of mobilization and rigid order in the air. All conditions were met, the reward is about to be granted, finally the promise to Abraham is about to be fulfilled. The people are on their final triumphal march. The whole operation, if successfully brought to a close, would have lasted a mere several days. And at that time there was no need for Meraglim, for scouts to explore the land, to see whether the land is good or bad, or to see whether the cities are surrounded by walls or they are open cities, what kind of population is there - strong, weak, a sickly population or a healthy population. There was no need for it, all those scouts and all the exploration and intelligence work is only necessary if a man has doubts. This was the pre-doubt period in Jewish history. Suddenly, something happened. They were mad with desire, there was no controlling/limiting element in their desire for vastness, the imagination excited them and their good sense was surrounded with a nimbus which was irresistible, "the more, the better, and you start gathering new goods even before you have completed gathering the other goods." The pagan is impatient and insatiable. The great tragedy happened, the great triumphal final march suddenly came to a stop, the people who rejected the basic principle of economic limitedness and aesthetic enjoyment, these people were not worthy to enter the Land. And then parashat *Vay'hi binsoa' ha-aron* lost its place - it was dislocated and displaced. Two little *Nuns* were inverted - the march was inverted. Instead of the march bringing them closer to Eretz Yisrael, the march took them away from Eretz Yisrael.

Parashas Shelach

Parsha Summary

Moshe sends twelve spies to scout out the land that God promised Israel, and they return with giant fruits but tell the people that they should not try to go to the land. The people cry that they want to return to Egypt, but Kalev and Yehoshua, two of the spies, insist that the land is very good. God tells Moshe that He would destroy the nation for this complaint, but Moshe begs God to save them for the sake of His name. God agrees but says that the ten spies will die and the nation will have to stay in the desert for 40 years and only their children will be able to go and inherit the land. Upon hearing this, some members of the nation regret their actions and attempt to go to the land on their own, but they are killed by Amalek and Canaan.

The second half of the Parsha teaches several mitzvot, with another story in the mix:

- ❑ *Nesachim*: animal sacrifices should be accompanied with flour-oil offerings, and wine
- ❑ *Challah*: when making bread, a portion of the dough should be separated and given as a gift to God [i.e. to the Kohen]
- ❑ *Shigegas Avodah Zarah*: if the entire congregation sins “regarding all of the mitzvot” [i.e. idolatry] by mistake, they must bring a cow as an olah and goat as a chatas; an individual must bring a kid-goat as a chatas; but a wanton sinner will be cut off
- ❑ Story of the *mekoshesh*: a man was found gathering sticks on Shabbat, and God told Moshe to put him to death by stoning
- ❑ *Tzitzis*: to remember to do the mitzvot, strings with blue must be tied to one’s garment

Classic Questions

Why did God tell Moshe to send spies, and what did they do wrong if they were sent by Moshe?

- **Rashi**: God and Moshe were hoping that their willingness to have spies be sent should be enough to assure the people that the land is good. Nevertheless, they insisted upon sending spies anyways, who lied to them about the land’s quality
- **Ramban**: the purpose of sending scouts was to gather intelligence for their impending military conquest, a worthwhile and positive mission. However, the spies stressed that conquering the land would be impossible (ignoring God’s promises), and later spread lies throughout the camp, saying that it was unfit for habitation by regular humans
 - **Netziv**: after seeing how, when God is in their midst performing open miracles, even “minor” sins would be dealt with severely (as in last week’s parsha), the nation chose to conquer the land in a less miraculous way, necessitating spies
- **Abarbanel**: the populace wanted to send spies on their own, to find out what the land would be like, but God insisted that Moshe be the one to send them, for military intelligence. In the end, they ignored God/Moshe’s mission and took on their own
- **R. Yaakov Medan**: besides for gathering information, the “spies” also went to express a form of conquering the land, to show that Israel expected it to soon be theirs

What motivated the spies and the nation to complain about Canaan?

- **Abarbanel**: they didn’t believe that God would help them, and even after the decree, those people who attempted to conquer the land on their own forgot that they need God
- **Akeidas Yitzchak**: the spies were not interested in the spiritual life that they would have in the land
- **Chasam Sofer** (intro to *Shut, Yoreh Deah*): the spies wanted to remain in the desert where all their needs were being taken care of without having to expend earthly efforts

What is the connection between the story of the spies and the mitzvot taught afterwards?

- **Rashi, Ibn Ezra:** the mitzvot of *nesachim* [and *challah*] are tied to the land, as if to reassure the nation that they shouldn't despair of ever making it there
- **Ramban:** the Torah here is completing the laws relating to the Mishkan that it started in Sefer Vayikra, and "mistaken idolatry" is taught here because of the recent national sin
 - **Tur:** the spies thought that they could undo God's promise, a mistake like idolatry
 - **Chizkuni:** the Torah here is noting that there is a sacrifice for an honest mistake, but a congregation or individual who deliberately sins--as the nation did here with the sin of the spies--cannot be forgiven with a sacrifice
- **Seforno:** now that the nation further distanced themselves from God with the sin of the spies, these mitzvos are necessary to repair that relationship
- **Sefas Emes:** the nation wanted to stay in the desert where they have the *man*-bread, the miraculous *be'er* for water, and the clouds of glory, so God ensured them that in the land, they would have the mitzvot of *challah* (for their bread), *nesachim* (corresponding to the water well), and be surrounded by *tzitzis* (like the clouds that surrounded them)

Why is the story of the wood-gatherer taught here?

- **Ramban:** this event simply happened at this point in time; after the sin of the spies
- **Tur** (and others): the wood-gatherer is an example of a sinner who acted wantonly
- **R. Samson Rafael Hirsch:** this shows spiritual progress. In the beginning of the Parsha, the nation violated God's word, but now they kept vigilant to ensure that every member of the community keep Shabbat [as the Torah here emphasizes the "congregation"]

Selected "Chazal"s or "Rashi"s

- By providing "Yehoshua" with his name (changed from "Hoshea"), Moshe was praying that he not be caught up with the sin of the other spies (*Sotah* 34b)
- Kalev went to Chevron on his own to the graves of the forefathers to pray that he not be swept up in the plan of the other spies (*Sotah* 34b)
- From the fact that God referred to the ten sinful spies as a "congregation," (*'eidah*) we learn that ten people are needed for a congregation's quorum for holy matters (*Sanhedrin* 2a)
- Because Israel cried on this night [the ninth of Av] for no reason, God decreed that this should be a night to cry for future generations [by destroying the Temple] (*Taanis* 29a)

A Short Vort

In the passage of *tzitzis*, we are told not to "stray after our heart and eyes." This seems to be out of order; first we see something, and then we want it (and if the Torah is referring to something one would want before seeing it in front of him, then the eyes should matter at all). The verb, "to stray," תתור, is the same verb used in the beginning of the Parsha to refer to the activity of the spies, לתור את ארץ כנען, they were to scout out the land of Canaan. The spies put their hearts before their eyes: instead of seeing the good of the land, their hearts motivated them to put a negative spin on whatever they saw. *Tzitzis* is there to remind us that we should not let our base desires color how we look at the world, but instead see the world as it truly is, as Hashem wants us to see it, as being full of opportunities to do His mitzvot (R. Elchanan Samet, R. Amnon Bazak, R. Jonathan Sacks)

Parashas Korach

Parsha Summary

Korach ben Yitzhar, with Dasan, Aviram, and On ben Pelet, complain that Moshe and Aharon made themselves the leaders. Moshe suggests that they all come to the Ohel Mo'ed to bring incense tomorrow, while Moshe unsuccessfully tried to appease the leaders of the rebellion. Moshe prays to God to punish them, but not be angry at the rest of the people. The next day, [Korach,] Dasan, and Aviram and their people are swallowed up by the earth with their families, and 250 people with incense fire-pans were burnt alive by God. God tells then Moshe that those fire-pans were sanctified, and he hammer them into a covering for the altar as a remembrance that people should not be like Korach.

The people then complain that Moshe and Aharon are causing Israelites to die, and so the people are punished with a plague. At Moshe's instruction, Aharon brought incense to stop the plague, and he was successful in doing so, but 14,700 people had already died. God tells Moshe to prove that Aharon was chosen by placing Aharon's staff in the Mishkan overnight together with sticks from the other twelve tribes, and the next day Aharon's staff was found to have sprouted flowers and almonds. God reminds Aharon that it is his and Leviim's responsibility to ensure that the people do not get too close to the Mishkan, lest they be killed. The Parsha ends with the gifts that should be given to the Kohanim: some sacrificial parts, Terumah, and firstborns. Leviim are to be given a tithe, and the Levi himself must give a tenth of that to the Kohen.

Classic Questions

What motivated Korach and his followers against Moshe and Aharon?

- **Chazal** (Yer. Sanhedrin 10:1): Korach was a heretic who did believe in the divinity of Moshe's teachings, because they don't make sense. A *tallis* entirely of *tekheiles* should not need tzitzis, and a room full of *seforim* should not need a *mezuzah*
 - **Meshech Chochmah**: really, Korach knew that Moshe was God's messenger, but nevertheless rebelled against the Torah that he was teaching them
- **Rashi**: As the son of Yitzhar ben Kehat, Korach was insulted that Elitzafan son of Uziel was named as the leader of the family of Kehat, since Yitzhar was older than Uziel
- **Ibn Ezra**: the people were angry that the sacrificial service was taken from the firstborns and given to the Kohanim (so this story actually occurred much earlier)
 - **Klei Chemdah**: they thought anyone anywhere should be allowed to bring a *korban* (as when *bamos*, personal altars were permitted)
- **Ramban**: they opposed Moshe's leadership, and knew they could stir up a rebellion when they heard that they would all be dying in the desert and not going to Canaan
- **Abarbanel/Chasam Sofer/Malbim**: several factions joined Korach, each with separate interests (combining the above complaints mentioned by different commentators)

Why did God say that the fire-pans were sanctified if they were used for a rebellion?

- **Rashi/Ibn Ezra/Abarbanel**: despite the sinful motivations of the people who brought them, at the end of the day these fire-pans were still meant to serve a sacrificial purpose

- **Ramban** (his 2nd answer): these would not have been holy automatically, but God wanted them sanctified in order to be a reminder for what happened to Korach's men
- **Akeidas Yitzchak**: the fire-pans were sacred because they were a vehicle through which the truth of God's choosing Aharon was expressed
- **Ha'amek Davar**: these people (but not Dasan and Aviram) sinned because of their deep desire to serve God, and even though their actions were inappropriate, their sacrificing their lives out of devotion to God is worth commemorating

What did the test of the flowering staff add to the previous miracles just done for Aharon?

- **Ramban**: so far, only Aharon's appointment was proven, not that he represented Levi
 - **Ramban**: they thought the service should still belong to the firstborns
 - **Bechor Shor**: they thought that the Leviim's service could be done by anyone
- **Ibn Ezra**: there was still room for the nation to think that some trick was at play
 - **Seforno/Rashbam**: perhaps anyone who brings incense inappropriately is killed
- **Ohr Hachayim**: people might think that miracles were performed on behalf of Moshe, a great prophet, but not specifically that Aharon was chosen by God as his Kohen Gadol

Important "Chazal"s or "Rashi"s

- What happened to On ben Pelet? His wife wanted to save him from the fate of Korach's followers, so she sat by the entrance to her tent and exposed herself, so no one would immodestly come near to call him to gather with the others (Sanhedrin 109b)
- R. Yochanan said, Korach was neither among the "burnt" or the "swallowed." A Braisa says that Korach was included in both the "burnt" and the "swallowed" (Sanhedrin 110a)
- Where did Moshe learn that Aharon's incense would stop the plague? This secret was taught to him by the Angel of Death, when Moshe was on Mt. Sinai (Shabbos 88a)
 - **Rashi (and others)**: this showed that *ketores* itself is not the source of death, as the people thought (since Korach's followers died bringing *ketores*)
 - **Rakanti** (explained by R. Chaim Friedlander, *Sifsei Chaim Mo'adim* 3 p. 132): the "secret" is that death comes through disconnecting from God, and *ketores*, which is Aramaic for "tying," strengthens the connection to God, the source of life

A Short Vort

After extremely dramatic demonstrations of the validity of Moshe and Aharon's leadership, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of Israelites, why did God still want to perform the test of Aharon's staff? Beyond the reasons given by the commentators above, perhaps God wanted to make the same point, but through a different method--instead of teaching about Aharon's role through violence and destruction, God wanted to impart the same message by peaceful means. Aharon was chosen to teach with love, and provide Israel with life, symbolized by his flowering staff, which is the primary, positive aspect of his leadership, not the deaths of all the many who challenged it. (R. Jonathan Sacks)

Parashas Chukas

Parsha Summary

The laws of *tumas mes* (impurity of a dead body): a red cow is to be burnt and its ashes sprinkled over water; this water is used to purify someone who comes in contact with a dead body but the water itself causes anyone who touches it to become impure. A dead body will “impurify” anything in its tent that was not in a sealed container.

Miriam dies, and the people complain that they have no water. Moshe and Aharon are commanded to procure water from a rock, and they hit the rock to produce water. God tells Moshe and Aharon that they will die in the desert because they did not sanctify Him before the people. Moshe sent a message to the King of Edom asking to go through his land, but they refuse to allow them entry, instead greeting Israel with the sword. Israel then traveled from Kadesh to Hor HaHar, where Aharon is told to ascend the mountain with Moshe and his son to die there, and the people mourn his passing for 30 days. The Canaani King Arad and his people attack Israel, and take a captive, but Israel calls out to God and prevails. Traveling around Edom, the nation complains about the desert-travel and their food, and God sends snakes to bite them. The nation repents, and God tells Moshe to fashion a bronze serpent on a pole, saying whoever looks towards it shall be healed.

The nation traveled more, and sang a song of thanks for the well of water they had. They asked Sichon, king of Emori to let them pass, but he instead did battle with them and lost, letting Israel take over the land. Israel also conquered Ya'azer of the Emori, and the land of Og, King of the Bashan, after Hashem assured Moshe not to fear him.

Classic Questions

Why is a deceased human body the source of ritual impurity?

- **Ramban (and others)**: impurity reflects the fact that man's mortality is a result of sinning
- **Bekhor Shor, Chizkuni**: the *tumah* discourages excessive mourning or dealing with the dead (which should be minimal because of our assurance that the soul still lives on)
- **Chinuch**: the dead body represents the greatest spiritual loss, because it is the form of the person without that which makes him human
 - **Kuzari** (2:60): *tumah* is found wherever the potential for life-spirit is lost

Why are Moshe and Aaron told they would not enter the Land after Moshe hit the rock-well?

- **Rashi**: they should have spoken to the rock instead of Moshe hitting it with his staff
 - **Maharal**: speaking implies willing obedience, but hitting implies forced coercion
- **Rambam** (Intro to Avot): Moshe lost his temper, and the nation thought God was angry
- **Many**: they gave the nation the impression that the water from the rock wasn't a miracle
 - **Chizkuni, R. Chananel** (in Ramban): because they didn't mention God's name
 - **Bechor Shor**: because their words implied that they themselves had doubts
- **R. Albo** (Sefer Halkkarim 4:22): Moshe and Ahron should have performed this miracle on their own, without having to consult with God first
- **Abarbanel, Ralbag & Others**: the punishment is not really because of this episode, but because of an earlier sin, but God didn't state it explicitly until now

Why did the nation complain about their food here, and why were they punished with snakes?

- **Bechor Shor**: this story actually occurred much earlier, when the *man* first fell
 - **Seforno, Ohr Hachayim**: the instrument of punishment was a snake, a symbol of slander (in *Gan Eden*, appropriate because the people “slandered” the *man*)
- **Sifrei, Rashi**: the nation was specifically afraid that the food would cause them to explode, because they would eat it but not have to expel anything
 - **Netziv** (Emek ha-Netziv, Beha’aloscha 30): they knew that they could survive by a miracle, but thought that once they’d enter the Land, the miracle would cease and their bodies would explode with the food that they had been eating before
- **Akeidas Yitzchak, R. Hirsch**: the people were tired of the miraculous sustenance and wanted to start supporting themselves, but God reminded them that they need His miracles to survive in the desert at all, a place that would naturally be very dangerous

Important “Chazal”s and “Rashi”s

- Even King Shelomo, wisest of men, did not understand the law of the red heifer
 - **R. Akiva (Yoma 14a)**: the mystery is that the waters of the cow’s ashes purify someone impure, but if sprinkled on a pure person the water make him impure
 - **Midrash, Kli Yakar**: the mystery is that this ‘purification ritual’ looks like sorcery
 - **Ramban**: the mystery is that this is a semi-sacrifice but is done out of the Temple
- When Miriam died, the well that accompanied them for 40 years dried up [proving that it was in her merit] (Taanis 9a, but in Bava Metzia 81b it is attributed to Avraham’s merit)
- The king of Arad heard that the clouds that protected Israel in the merit of Aharon disappeared at his death, and he thought that was a sign to attack (Rosh Hashana 3a)
- Can a snake give life or death? Rather, if Israel looked upwards and subjugated their hearts towards Heaven, they’d be healed (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:8)
- R. Shmuel bar Nachman in the name of R. Yochanan: “therefore the singers say...” (21:22) those who rule over their desires have said, let’s consider the calculations of the loss due to a mitzvah against its reward, and the reward of a sin against its loss, and if you do so, you’ll be built in this world and settled in the world to come (Bava Basra 78b)
 - **Malbim**: generally, military battles contain lessons for “the battle of desires”

A Short Vort

Why would the Torah include a mitzvah which is totally unintelligible, and would cause the nations and the *yetzer hara’* to ridicule the Torah (*chas ve-shalom*)? R. Yosef of Salant (and many others) writes that the reason for giving us commandments that we cannot understand reminds us that even though God granted us profound cognitive abilities, we are ultimately limited in understanding His ways, especially with regard to how the world is run. A person who needs to use the *parah adumah* is someone who has encountered death, and may question why it would be that the world has suffering and destruction with no apparent reason. The “cure” for the impurity that comes with this encounter is the ultimate non-understandable law, the red cow, to remind us that even though we may not understand what’s behind it all, that is only because of our limited abilities, but God certainly knows what He is doing.

Parashas Balak

Parsha Summary

Balak, king of Moav, is scared of the B'nei Yisrael, and so he sends messengers to hire Bil'am ben Be'or to curse them. After asking God and refusing once, Bil'am consents. Three times, an angel appears on the road and is seen by Bil'am's donkey, which avoids the angel, and when Bil'am gets angry at it the donkey complains to Bil'am. Bil'am then sees the angel, which allows him to pass but warns that he must speak as God says. Bil'am comes to Balak, the two of them bring sacrifices and Bil'am makes three attempts to curse Israel: in Kiryat Chutzos, the summit of Sdei Tzofim, and "Rosh ha-Pe'or" overlooking Yeshimon. However, each time Bil'am says in front of Balak and his people that God wishes Israel to be blessed, describing how God took the people out of Egypt and guides them through history, praises Israel for its uniqueness and blesses Israel with strength and prosperity. Balak becomes angry, but Bil'am continues by prophesying about the "end of days," when Israel will reign supreme and all other nations will be laid waste.

In Shittim, the B'nei Yisrael stray after girls of Moav, even bowing to their gods. A plague starts, and God telling Moshe to kill the leaders of the nation, so he gathers the judges and tells them to do so. A person brings a Midianite woman before Moshe, and Pinchas ben El'azar stabs him and the woman with a spear, ending the plague.

Classic Questions

If God spoke to Bil'am, was he a prophet (attainable only by the righteous)? Or was he not?

- **Chazal** in many places indicate that Bil'am was a prophet, sorcerer, and philosopher
- **Ibn Ezra**: Bil'am was nothing more than a skilled astrologer (who could tell the future)
 - **Akeidas Yitzchak**: the Sages nevertheless call him a "prophet" because he happened to state the future, despite not knowing the future through divine
- **Abarbanel, Ramban, Ralbag**: Bil'am was just a magician, but God gave him prophecy to teach the nations about B'nei Yisrael through their most famous sorcerer
 - **Ramban**: when prophesying, he was just below the level of the avos
 - **R. Chisdai Crescas** (Ohr H' 2:4:3): Bil'am was not morally fit to be a prophet, but his prophecy was an unnatural miracle (and thus similar to Moshe's)
- **Rambam** (Moreh Nevuchim 2:41-45): Bil'am had degrees of actual prophecy

Would Bil'am's curse have been effective, if God allowed him to make it? If not, why did God mess with him?

- **Chazal** in many places indicate that Bil'am either had the power to curse effectively
 - **Ramban** (see Iggeres Hakodesh ch. 5): Bil'am was indeed a powerful magician
 - **Rabbeinu Bachayei, Seforno**: Bil'am could only curse, not bless (effectively)
 - **Netziv explaining Midrash Tanhuma**: Bil'am knew how to use the "evil eye" which is a natural force for evil (and would be as effective as a physical attack)
- **Ibn Ezra**: Bil'am may have been a great astrologer, but had no power to harm anyone
 - **Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni**: God knew that there would soon be a plague at Ba'al Pe'or, and stopped Bil'am so that no one would attribute that plague to his curse
- **Meshech Chochmah**: although Bil'am's curse would not be effective, God wanted to scare the nations by literally putting words in his mouth (and his donkey's mouth)

What kind of blessing is it to say that Israel is a nation which dwells “alone” (*badad*)?

- **Rashi**: at the end of days, only Israel will remain when other nations are destroyed
- **Rashbam, Ibn Ezra**: the nation is alone in that it does not assimilate into other nations
- **Ralbag, Akeidas Yitzchak**: “*badad*” means distinctive
- **Bechor Shor**: “*badad*” means secure

How did the act of Pinchas relate to God and Moshe’s instructions to the judges?

- **Rashi (Sanhedrin 82a)**: the judges set up courts to convict those guilty of inter-relations
 - [Zimri’s action was distinct enough from the rest of the nation’s for Pinchas to act]
- **Sifrei, Chizkuni, Seforno**: the judges were supposed to kill the perpetrators, but were hesitating until Pinchas got up and began to do so himself
- **Abarbanel**: Moshe commanded the tribe leaders to kill the idolaters, and Pinchas saw that one of the leaders (Zimri) was himself of the sinners

Important “Chazal”s and “Rashi”s

- A person is led down the path he wishes to go. We learn this in the Torah, where God first said to Bil’am not to go [with Balak’s men], and then told him to go (Makkos 10b)
- Bil’am knew when God got angry every day, and planned to give a curse at that moment, but on the day he came to curse Israel, God did not get angry (Berachos 7a, San. 105a)
 - **Yad Ramah**: not that God literally gets angry, but that it is comparable to the punishment a king would give if a subject is sinning before him at that moment
- The donkey said to Bil’am in front of Balak’s emissaries... “I serve you for riding during the day... and as a conjugal liaison for you at night” (Sanhedrin 105b)
 - **Maharatz Chajes (Mevo ha-Talmud, 20)**: The rabbis have a principle [of interpreting the Torah], that the righteous should be praised as much as possible, and the wicked should be charged with all possible abominable deeds
- Bil’am saw how their tents were not facing each other, and blessed them (B Basra 80a)
- [Yisrael] lies down like a lion-- the Jew wakes up with the strength of a lion to perform mitzvos of the morning: reciting *Shema*, wearing *tzitzis* and *tefillin* (Rashi, Tanchuma)

A Short Vort

When God “opens the mouth of the donkey” and it speaks miraculously, Bil’am does not react in shock or wonderment, but instead continues berating her, now verbally instead of physically. We might think that only the most obstinate person, blinded by anger and self-importance, could be so oblivious as to not react to such a miraculous occurrence. Rav Shimon Schwab, however, sees in Bil’am an all-too common phenomenon, albeit taken to the extreme: the ignoring of God’s might and presence which guides us every day. A religious person must be sensitive to nature, especially any change or impressive natural feat (such as a thunderstorm) that he/she might encounter, in order to see God’s hand in the smaller miracles surrounding us constantly.

Parashas Pinchas

Parsha Summary

Pinchas ben El'azar is blessed with peace and priesthood for stopping God from wiping out Israel in a plague. He did this by killing Zimri and Kozbi, a royal-*nasi* couple engaged in inter-relations. Moshe is told to wage war with Midian who enticed Israel into sinning.

A census is conducted, with each tribe's families listed by name as representatives are appointed to apportion the Land once they arrive there. Although the land should be divided and inherited patrilineally, the five daughters of Tzelofchod ben Hefer request to Moshe that their father's inheritance remain within the family. God teaches Moshe that women do inherit land if there is no male heir. Moshe asks God for a successor, and Yehoshua is appointed.

The timed sacrifices are detailed here, from the lamb brought each morning and evening (the *tamid*) to the *musaf* of each holiday: Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh, Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, and all seven/eight days of Sukkot.

Classic Questions

Who seduced the Israelites at Shittim - was it Moav (as described earlier) or Midian (Kozbi's nationality, who are the subject of God's revenge here and later in Ch 31)?

- **Rashi, Chazal:** the women were from Moav, but it was all planned by Bila'am of Midian
 - **Bava Kama 38b:** God did not want to wage war against Moav because of a future righteous descendant - Rus
- **Tagum Yonasan (22:1):** Midian and Moav were the same nation at this point in history
- **Abarbanel:** these were actually women of Midian who fooled Israel into thinking that they were Moavites
- **Kli Yaker:** both nations were involved, but the Midianite women actively seduced the men of Israel while the women of Moav allowed themselves to be taken passively

Why did Pinchas receive a blessing of priesthood if he was already the grandson of Aharon?

- **Rashi:** Pinchas was already born when the priesthood was given to Aharon and his descendents, but was too young to be anointed at the time, and so was never a priest
 - **Tosfos** (Yevamos 22a): none of Ahron's grandchildren were anointed
- **Ramban (and others):** the blessing is that his descendents will be *kohanim gedolim*
- **Chizkuni, Bechor Shor:** a *kohen* who commits manslaughter can no longer bless the nation, so God was saying that Pinchas remains a valid *kohen* despite having killed

Would God truly have wiped out the nation in this plague if not for Pinchas' action?

- Based on **Rashi:** the judges would have stopped the plague but Pinchas acted sooner
- **Ramban:** it is the way of plagues that God indeed kills the innocent along with the guilty
- **Seforno:** the plague [that Pinchas stopped] was the one decreed at the sin of the spies

How was the land apportioned?

- **Rashi:** each tribe received a portion according to its population size
- **Ramban:** the land was first divided into equal portions for each tribe, then each family (named here) divided that into equal portion(s) by lottery

Important “Chazal”s and “Rashi”s

- Despite being a grandson of Aharon, Pinchas was not yet a kohen because he was born to Elazar before he was anointed, and was too young to be anointed himself at the time (Rashi based on Zevachim 101b)
- [God commanded a census to be taken now] just as a shepherd counts his flock after it was ravaged by wolves. Alternatively, Moshe counted the people now just as a shepherd counts his master’s flock when he receives them and when he returns them (Rashi)
- God’s name [*yud-hei*] is added to all the families listed to show that God testifies that despite being enslaved in Egypt, the Egyptians did not defile the Israelite women (Rashi)
- The women were not killed in the desert as the men, for they loved the land (Rashi)
- [Moshe’s request began, “God of the spirits,”] for each person thinks differently from one another, so he asked that God appoint someone who is favorable to everyone (Rashi)
- All *hatat*-goats offered as *musaf* come to atone for sins against the Sanctuary and its holy items (Rashi, Shavuos 9a)
- The new month offering is called a ‘*hatat* for God,’ as if God says, “bring a sin offering for me for having diminished the [light of the] moon (Chullin 60a)
 - **Rif, Tosfos:** the sacrifice is to atone for the people Israel, which God arranged for the new month so as to appease the moon
 - **Maharal** (Gur Aryeh, Be’er haGolah 4): the sacrifice is brought to make up for the moon’s monthly disappearance, which is caused by its being closer to Earth
 - **R. S.R. Hirsch:** the new month is a call to repentance, and man’s returning from sin justifies God having created the world allowing for man to have free will
 - **R. Moshe Shapiro:** As a *mo’ed* where work is still permitted, *Rosh Chodesh* symbolizes the natural order, where God’s influence is hidden, symbolized by the fact that He shrunk the moon
- The total of seventy bulls brought in decreasing number over the seven days of Sukkot represent the seventy nations who will cease to exist in the future

A Short Vort

Why did God need to provide Pinchas with the blessing of peace? Both Netziv and Meshech Chochmah point out that Pinchas committed a violent act, and although this action ended up saving more people, it nevertheless takes its toll on the person who did it. God needed to assure Pinchas (and us) that because both his motivations were noble, *and* because his violence ended the plague which would have killed more people, it was the right thing to do.

Parashas Mattos

Parsha Summary

Moshe teaches the tribe's leaders about the laws of vows, and under what circumstances might a father or a husband annul his daughter's/wife's oaths.

God tells Moshe to wage a war of revenge against Midian for seducing the men of Israel and causing a plague. Under the leadership of Pinchas, they formed an army to kill all the men and burn the cities, while they took the animals, women and spoils. Moshe was angry that they did not also kill the women, who were most at fault for seducing the Israelites. The army therefore killed the adult women as well. Moshe taught the nation the procedure of purifying or purging the utensils that the army took as spoils of war. God had the nation apportion the spoils with half going to soldiers and the other half for the people. One 500th of the soldier's portion and one 50th of the nation's portion should be given to Elazar the Kohen as a donation to God.

Reuvain and Gad had a very large flock, and so they asked Moshe if they can settle in the lands that they had just conquered instead of crossing the Jordan. Moshe first admonished them, reminding them how the previous generation was punished for rejecting the land. The two tribes assured Moshe that they would join their brethren in conquering the land and return home to the east of the Jordan only after Israel was settled, and so Moshe accepted and allowed Reuvain, Gad, and half of the tribe of Menashe to settle in those lands. The conquered kingdoms of Sichon and Og were thus given to Reuvain and Gad. Machir ben Menashe conquered the area of Gilad and settled there, and Yair ben Menashe conquered 'it's environs' [*havoteihem*] and settled there.

Classic Questions

Why did Moshe gather the tribal leaders to teach them specifically laws of vows?

- **Rashi:** Moshe accorded them the honor of being taught first, before the nation
 - **Commentaries on Rashi:** specifically these laws, because judges can annul a person's vows, and even an individual leader, but only the greatest scholars
- **Ibn Ezra:** this was taught connected to the next sections, where the leaders of the tribes are charged with making sure that Reuven and Gad keep their vow to join Israel's battles
- **Ramban:** better that the masses are not aware of the possibility of having vows annulled

What were the two tribes really after, and why did Moshe initially refuse but concede eventually?

- **Rashi, Chazal:** Gad and Reuven incorrectly prioritized their material wealth
- **Ramban:** Moshe suspected that the tribes feared the nations of Canaan and did not believe God would fight for them, and so he accepted their deal to join in the battles
 - **Ralbag:** Moshe thought they'd frighten the other tribes from entering the land
- **Bechor Shor:** Moshe misunderstood, but in fact the tribes were actually intending to lead the battles, which they could do more easily if their families were elsewhere
- **Akedas Yitzhak:** their sin was in not mentioning God's role in conquering or wealth, so Moshe had them acknowledge that all past and future conquests are from God
- **Abarbanel:** these two tribes were motivated by a wish to dwell separately in a fertile land, but Moshe misunderstood their request as motivated by fear of the enemy nations