

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 Bachaye 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*.