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The Command to Number

1: 1-19

The command to number DIG: Why did God have Moshe take the census? Why so many names? Why do we need all of this? What is significant to you about the results of the census: (a) the large numbers? (b) The manpower it took to complete such a census? (c) The explosive increase of numbers from the time 400 years earlier when Isra'el entered Egypt with only 70 people? Other than the military, what other purpose did the census serve?

REFLECT: God chose men to help Moshe in taking the census. Who are those who stand with you in your service to the Lord? We see in this passage how Moses spent time with the Lord, seeking His wisdom and guidance to lead the people. How important is your time with the Lord? Do you find direction and guidance in the Lord for your life and ministry in that time? Take a moment to thank the Lord for the people He has put in your path.

Parashah 34: B'Midbar (In the wilderness) 1:1 to 4:20

(See my commentary on Deuteronomy, to see link click [Af](#) - Parashah)

The Key People are Moshe, Aaron, the heads of the tribes (1:5-15), Aaron's sons Nadab and Ithamar, Levi's sons Gershon, Korah and Merari, and all their sons, the firstborn males.

The Scene is B'Midbar Sinai, in the wilderness of Sinai.

The Main Events include a census for the army, tent arrangement in the camp, Levites replacing firstborns as God's own, then set apart for Tabernacle service, Kohathites counted, and instructions for Aaron and his sons to cover the holy items, so Kohathites carrying them wouldn't see them and die.¹⁴

Many are the words of the Torah, and there are many places in which they have been given. When **ADONAI** first spoke to **the children of Isra'el**, He spoke through **Moshe** while **they** were still **slaves in Egypt**. He next spoke to **them** after **the Exodus** at **Mount Sinai**. This

is where the teachings of the second half of **Exodus** and all of **Leviticus** originated. Now, in **Numbers**, or **Bamidbar** (“in the wilderness”), **YHVH** once again spoke to the second generation of **Israelites**. Only this time, it was from within **the Tabernacle**, from between the two cherubim that flanked the ark of the covenant (**Exodus 25:22**). From here, as **Isra’el** would travel, **Ha’Shem** would periodically give **them** more instruction.

The book of **Numbers** is the record of the revelation from **God in the wilderness of Sinai**, up to the border of **the Promised Land**, on the plains of Mo’ab. **Numbers** is a combination of history and legislation. Its legislation pertains to the Sanctuary, the camp, purification of life, and includes many well-known teachings such as the Nazarite vow, the wearing of fringes, the Aaronic Blessing, the ashes of the red heifer, and more. Its history tells the story of how the new nation of **freed slaves** found **themselves** wandering in the desert for forty years before **they** were permitted to enter Canaan. But, **Numbers** is no mere chronicle of the outstanding events during **their** journey. It interprets those events, and shows the faithful watchfulness of **ADONAI** in every difficulty and danger, as well as the stern severity of divine judgments against rebellion and apostasy.¹⁵

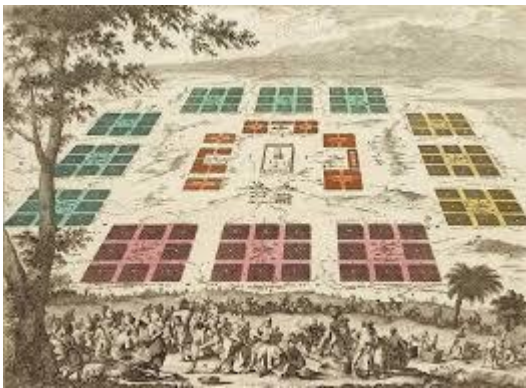
As the book of **Numbers** begins, **Isra’el** had been encamped at **Sinai** for ten months. Most of the time had been spent working on **the Tabernacle**. It took 40 days for **Moses** to receive the full instructions for **the Tabernacle**. Six months were spent on building **the Tabernacle**. One month was spent on learning the mitzvot of **the Tabernacle** and instituting **its** worship. Finally, nine months after their arrival at **Mount Sinai**, **the Tabernacle** was completed. The outer camp was called the camp of **the Israelites**, the middle one was the camp of **the Levites**, and the innermost one was called the camp of **the Presence**, or **the Sh’khinah**.

The Tabernacle was to function as a portable **Mount Sinai**. **God’s** presence had come to rest on **Mount Sinai**. **The children of Isra’el** were unwilling to leave **Mount Sinai** unless **the LORD** would go with **them**. **Moshe** had said: **If Your Presence doesn’t go with us, don’t make us go from here (Exodus 33:15)**. Therefore, until **the Tabernacle** was completed, **they** were unable to leave **Mount Sinai**, for **God’s Presence** was to accompany **them** in the midst of **the Tabernacle**. Having completed **the Tabernacle**, **the children of Isra’el** were ready to begin **their** preparations for departure. The trip through **the wilderness** was to be a short one. After leaving **Mount Sinai**, it would be a matter of only a few weeks until **they** arrived on the borders of **the Promised Land**. Then **they** were to begin a military invasion, ousting the Canaanites and settling in **their** lands. As part of the preparations for departure and war, **Ha’Shem** ordered that **a census** was to be taken of **the children of Isra’el**.

The names of all the men twenty years old and older were recorded.

The census (1:1-4): Then ADONAI spoke to Moshe in the wilderness from the Tabernacle. One of the most numerous emphases in the book of **Numbers** is that **YHVH spoke to Moses**, and through **him**, to **Isra'el**. From the opening words of the book (**1:1**) to its closing words (**36:13**), this concept is stated over a hundred-and-fifty times and in more than twenty ways. One Hebrew name for the book of **Numbers** is “**And ADONAI spoke,**” the first word in the Hebrew text. This name is highly appropriate, given the strong emphasis on **God's** revelation to **Moshe** in **Numbers**.

ADONAI spoke to Moshe on the first day of the second month of the second year, one month after setting up **the Tabernacle** (see the commentary on **Exodus**, **to see link click Hg - So the Tabernacle was Set Up on the First Day of the First Month**), and the appearance of **the Divine Presence** (see **Exodus Hh - The Glory of the LORD Filled the Tabernacle**), **after they had left the land of Egypt (1:1)**. The book begins with the word “**then.**” In Hebrew, the word **then** is a sequential conjunction, and relates to what happened before. **The Israelites** had been given the Torah in **Exodus** and **Leviticus**. Now, what were **they** going to do with it?¹⁶



God said: Take a census of the entire assembly of the people of Isra'el, by clans and families. Record the names of all the men twenty years old and older who are subject to military service in Isra'el, with only a few exceptions (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Dp - Regulations for a Holy War**). **You and Aaron are to count those who are able to bear arms. Take with you from each tribe someone who is head of a clan (1:2-4)**. **Moses and Aaron** were to complete this task together, but the primary responsibility lay with **Moshe**. There is a remarkable specificity in the numbering process, moving from the broadest grouping to the individual. **The census** was counted in decreasing size: **tribe, clan, household, individual**. This stylistic device, common in Hebrew prose, moves from the most general to the specific, thus giving a sense of the

totality and the enormity of the task.¹⁷

From **10:11**, it is clear that the **census** was completed in fewer than twenty days. By contrast, **David's census**, which likewise encompassed some **600,000 names**, took nine months and twenty days to complete (**Second Samuel 24:8**)! The difference can be explained by the different methods of **counting**. **David's census** was conducted with much effort from **tribe by tribe, clan by clan, family by family, person by person**. **Moses**, on the other hand, made each **clan** responsible for **its own count**; **he** and **the chiefs of their fathers' clans** (see below) merely supervised. In this way, all the **clans** were mustered simultaneously, and **their** individual totals had only to be **counted**.

However, our knowledge of the end of the story makes this a sad record to read. **Ha'Shem** would later declare to the **Exodus** generation: **Your carcasses will fall in the desert! Every single one of you (over the age of twenty) who are included in the first census (see [Ai - The First Census: The Old Generation of Rebellion](#)) over the age of twenty, you who complained against Me (see [By - The Report of the Spies](#)), will certainly not enter the Land about which I raised My hand to swear that I would have you live in it - except for Caleb and Joshua (14:29-30)**. All died in the dry, barren **wilderness**, though **God** had intended for **them** to enjoy the good life in **the Good Land** under **His** generous hand.

The tribal heads (1:5-16): Why so many **names**? Why so many details? Since we know that **the Word of God** is inspired, how do we read these **names**? There are thirty-seven **names** listed here. **If the names are translated into their meaning**, then reading them would be edifying. Even refreshing. It gives us a sense of the yearning **the people** had in **Egypt** for their **God** to name **their sons** in this manner. Every name has a message, a story about the struggle and triumph of **their** family. **ADONAI** cares deeply about each and every name here. We don't know who these **men** are, but **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** knows **them** and counted them worthy enough to be included in the Scriptures. We see the same thing in **Romans 16** where people are mentioned that we do not even know. But the point is that **God** knows **them**.

These are the men to take with you:

From **Reuben**, Elitzur the son of Sh'de'ur translated: **Behold the son, my God is a rock, son of Sh'de'ur who gives light (1:5)**;

From **Simeon**, Shlumi'el the son of Tzurishaddai translated: **The One who heard me, the friend of God, son of the Rock, my Almighty (1:6)**;

From **Judah**, Nachshon the son of 'Amminadan, grandfather of **Boaz (1:7)** is mentioned

in the book **Ruth** (see the commentary on **Ruth Bd - Coda: The Genealogy of David**);

From **Issachar**, N'tan'el the son of Tzu'ar (1:8);

From **Zebulun**, Eli'av the son of Helon translated: **From the One who lifted me up, God is my Father, son of the power of God (1:9).**

Of the children of Joseph:

From **Ephraim**, Elishama the son of 'Ammihud translated: **From the One who shall make me doubly fruitful, My God has heard, son of my kinsmen, His majesty;**

From **Manasseh**, Gamli'el the son of P'dahtzur translated: **From the One who will cause me to remember the reward of God, son of the Rock who has redeemed me (1:10).**

From **Benjamin**, Avidan the son of Gid'oni translated: **From the Son of My right hand, My Father is Judge, son of the man of war (1:11);**

From **Dan**, Achi'ezer the son of 'Ammishaddai translated: **My brother is a Helper, my people are from Shaddai (1:12);**

From **Asher**, Pag'i'el the son of 'Okhran translated: **Encountered by God (1:13);**

From **Gad**, Elyasaf the son of De'u'el (1:14), but if you go to 2:14, his name is Re'u'el translated: **One who walks with God.** Why the change? He was called De'u'el because he merely **knew God**, but then he was changed to Re'u'el because his relationship with God grew into a personal relationship, and like **Enoch** (see the commentary on **Genesis Bv - Enoch Walked with God for 300 years**), he walked with God.

From **Naftali**, Achira the son of 'Enan" translated: **The One who sees (1:15).**¹⁸ These were the ones called from the assembly, the chiefs of their fathers' clans and heads of thousands in Isra'el (1:16).

The summary of the census (1:17-19): Moshe was anxious to carry out the order he had received, so, he and Aaron took these men who had been designated by name, and on the first day of the second month since the Exodus, they gathered the whole assembly to state their genealogies by clans and families and recorded the names of all those twenty years old and over, as well as their total numbers. Moshe counted them in the Sinai Desert, just as ADONAI had ordered him. Hebrew prose often gives a summary statement and follows with details that explain the summary. This verse is that summary, and the next file (see **Ak - Numbering the Tribes**) presents the details. Besides its primary military purpose, taking **the census** also served to demonstrate the miracle that YHVH had performed to fulfill His promises to Isra'el (see **Ae - Stars of Heaven, Grains of Sand, and the Promises of God**).

Numbers is a very important book for us today. In **First Corinthians 10:1-5, 8-9**, Rabbi Sha'ul says: **I don't want you to miss the significance of what happened to your**

fathers. All of them were guided by the pillar of cloud, and they all passed through the sea; they all immersed themselves into Moshe, (in reference to Numbers 33). Also they all ate the same food from the Spirit (in reference to Numbers 11). And they all drank the same drink from the Spirit - for they all drank from the Spirit-sent Rock which followed them, and that Rock was the Messiah (in reference to Numbers 20). Yet with the majority of them God was not pleased, so their bodies were strewn across the desert (in reference to Numbers 14). These are warnings for us. And let us not engage in sexual immorality, as some of them did, with the consequence that 23,000 died in a single day (in reference to Numbers 25). And let us not put the Messiah to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by snakes (in reference to Numbers 21). So, the book of Numbers is really Moshe's letter to the congregations of God today. And the book spares us much sorrow because it describes only the first three years of the wilderness wanderings, and the last, the fortieth, year. Only four of the forty years, enough to get the point.¹⁹

*Dear Heavenly Father, Praise You that You are all-knowing and can even number **the hairs on our heads** (Matthew 10:30). You love all and want to have a relationship with everyone, but You force Yourself on no one, so it is important to seek after You and follow You. You so graciously offer eternal love to all who love and fear You. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His mercy for those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so Adonai has compassion on those who fear Him (Psalm 103:11-13)*

The point of living on earth is not to move to some place or land for a better earthly life, nor to store up money for an earthly retirement, but rather to joyfully love and serve You for an eternal life in heaven. May we live our life on earth with our eyes fixed on You and how we can please You. This life will be over soon, and for those who have chosen to love You as their Lord and Savior - Heaven's eternal joys await (Romans 10:9-10)! How Awesome Your wondrous love that so mercifully paid the price for our sin, the awful penalty of death! You are forever to be praised. Bless ADONAI my God, from everlasting to everlasting! May Your glorious Name be blessed; may it be exalted above all blessing and praise (Nehemiah 9:5c). In Messiah Yeshua's holy Name and power of His resurrection. Amen