

**Mordekhi's Drash for Shabbat May 19, 2007 / Sivan 2, 5767**

**Parashah #34: *B'Midbar* (In the Wilderness), *B'Midbar* (Numbers) 1:1-4:20**

**Haftarah: *Hoshea* (Hosea) 2:1(1:10)-2:22(20)**

**Suggested *Messianic Writings* reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27**

Shalom,

With this Parashah we begin the book of *B'Midbar* (Numbers). The title "Numbers" came from the Septuagint and is based on the "numbering," or census, of the people of Israel in the first few chapters, and chapter 26. The original Hebrew title is "B'Midbar," which means, "In the wilderness," coming from the first few words of the book. B'Midbar is written in the typical Hebrew style, which means that the writings are not necessarily in chronological order, but are oftentimes more in topical order. For example, B'Midbar 1:1 begins on the first day of *the second month* of the second year after they had left the land of Egypt; when we get to 7:1, it reverts back to the time of the setting up of the tabernacle, which was the first day of *the first month* of the second year, according to *Sh'mot* (Exodus) 40:17; then, *B'Midbar* 9:1-5 is about the observance of *Pesakh* (Passover) on the fourteenth day of *the first month* of the second year.<sup>1</sup>

It can be observed the effect that the giving of Torah at Mt. Sinai had upon the people of Israel. During the incident of the golden calf, *Sh'mot* (Exodus) 32:25 notes that the people had "gotten out of control," but in our current text, the tribes are beginning to move about in an orderly fashion.<sup>2</sup> Occasionally I hear someone say that numbers are not important to G-d, that congregations should not keep records and totals, but simply move with the Spirit and hear what He has to say. This is the concept of "Get out of the book of Numbers and get into the book of Acts." But in the eyes of HaShem, I believe that the book of "Numbers" is just as important as the book of "Acts." In the wilderness, Israel did indeed look like it was out of control, and HaShem commanded Moshe to number the people. Rabbi Russell Resnik<sup>3</sup> says that, "The census imposes order and dignity upon this scene. Israel may look (and act) like a collection of scarcely freed slaves, but then they are numbered as ranks of fighting men who will encamp in strict order around the tabernacle of meeting. Numbering, like naming, implies mastery, control, a sense of purpose... Numbering, however, does not in itself change anything; rather it transforms our perspective. It gives us a way to manage what is already there."

Resnik sees a similar transformation later on in *B'Midbar*, in chapter 24, with the incident of Balaam. The enemies of Israel had called upon Balaam to curse Israel, but when Balaam looked out upon the orderly encampment, the *Ruakh* (Spirit) of G-d came upon him, and he could only pronounce a blessing: "How lovely are your tents, O *Ya'akov*; your encampments, Israel! They spread out... like aloes planted by Adoni." I wonder if *Rav Sha'ul* had this concept in mind when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 14:40 to, "let all things be done in a proper and orderly way." From our text, it is apparent that HaShem prefers orderliness over slovenliness.

Orderliness helps a congregation understand who does what and why. The *Messianic Writings* reading from 1 Corinthians 12 is concerned with the orderliness of the "body of Messiah," stating that each "member" of the body has a task, is needed, and that all parts are equal in importance, though some may appear more important than others. If one member of our "body" suffers, we should all suffer; if one member of our "body" is honored, we should all share in that joy. In the same sense then, "Numbers" is just as necessary to the body today as is "Acts," and vice-versa.

Regarding orderliness and census taking in Israel, there had to have been a purpose for a count. *Ramban* wrote that HaShem became angry with King David when he took a census, because David counted "unnecessarily... only to make him rejoice that he ruled over a large people." The Midrash states that whenever Israel was counted for a purpose, their numbers did not diminish, but when they were counted for no purpose, their numbers became diminished.<sup>4</sup>

Rabbi David Feinstein<sup>5</sup> believes that Torah was given *B'midbar*, in the wilderness, so that Israel would learn to rely on HaShem to supply their every need, and to immerse themselves completely in His service. Of the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) in Torah, 248 are considered "positive," 365 are considered

“negative.” Positive commandments are the “*you shall*” commandments; negative commandments are the “*you shall not*” commandments. “Negative,” as used here, has an entirely different connotation than, say, someone having a “negative” attitude.

Feinstein notes that the negative precepts could be fulfilled even in the absence of human beings; i.e., if there were no people, the Sabbath would not be desecrated, forbidden foods would not be eaten, idols would not be worshipped, etc. The positive precepts, however, require human bodies to fulfill them. These include such commands as observe the Sabbath, rejoice on the Festivals, observe the year of Jubilee, etc.

The prophet wrote of “The voice of someone crying out, ‘*In the wilderness (B’midbar) prepare the way of Adoni!*’” According to some Bible scholars and translators, this is the proper translation of *Mattityahu* (Matthew) 3:3, quoting *Yeshu’yahu* (Isaiah) 40:3. To me there is deeper meaning to the phrase this way as opposed to “‘The voice of someone crying out in the wilderness,’ Prepare the way of Adoni.” In the wilderness is where G-dly character is developed; in the wilderness we can either continue to complain and rebel against G-d, or learn to praise and submit to Him. In the wilderness is where we learn to prepare the way of Adoni for our own lives. Resnik writes, “Bible translator Everett Fox notes that, while there are outward obstacles to be overcome in the wilderness, ‘the main emphasis in these texts is on internal obstacles – the people’s lack of trust, faith, and courage. And as so often happens in the Torah, physical background, as important as it obviously is in Numbers what with a myriad of geographical locations noted, is overshadowed by the dominant issue of the relationship between Israel and G-d.’”<sup>6</sup> As we view the past, as we see the present, as we look to the future, this dominant issue remains and expands. The relationship between Israel and G-d becomes the relationship between each one of us and G-d. Because the relationship with Israel came first, we long for “all of Israel to be saved.”

The Haftarah in Hoshea continues with the “numbering” theme regarding the future: “The people of Israel will number as many as the grains of sand by the sea... so that the time will come when... it will be said to them, ‘You are the children of the living G-d.’”

When Israel “awakens” to the fact that Yeshua is her Messiah, and comes into order with the plans of her G-d, that will bring “order” to the rest of the planet. Then there will be multitudes of groups of ten Gentile men grabbing hold of the tzitziyot of Jews, wanting to go with them, because G-d is with them, as Zechariah prophesied (8:23).

Sha’alu shalom Yerushalayim.

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, Zondervan Publishing 1992

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Russell Resnik, *Gateways to Torah*, Lederer Publishing 2000

<sup>4</sup> Thoughts in this paragraph also from Resnik’s *Gateways*...

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi David Feinstein, *Seasonings of the Torah*, ArtScroll Publishing 2005

<sup>6</sup> Everett Fox, *The Schocken Bible, A new translation with introductions, commentary and notes*, Schocken Books 1995, as quoted in Resnik’s *Gateways*...

**B'rakhot v'todah rabbah** (Blessings & thank you very much)

**Mordekhi (Marc) & Yisraela Carmela (Teresa)**

This Yeshua, who has been taken away from you  
into heaven, will come back to you in just the  
same way as you saw him go into heaven.

(Acts 1:11 CJB)