

SHABBAT SHALOM. Today is 29 Iyar, the 44th day of the Omer, 5786. Corresponding to May 16, 2026

TORAH DIALOGUE

(p. 568 Hz) (p. 793 S) (p. 513 Hi) (p. 726 AS)

BAMIDBAR

Numbers 1:1

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1. "... and they established their genealogy according to their families, according to their fathers' household..." (1:18). It was understood that in these Jewish homes, each child knew who his father was. When Senator Obama was running for President the first time around, he came to Miami to speak at FIU. They arranged for a private meeting with 15 members of the clergy, half of whom were Black Christians. I was asked by the OU to attend; they wanted a Yarmulke to be present. So I went. The Senator spoke for ten minutes, mostly right out of the Democratic platform. He took two questions. A Black minister asked what was the Senator's view on Black homosexuality. The Senator said, "There are no reporters in the room, so I can speak candidly. Homosexuality is not a problem in the Black community. The real issue plaguing our community is family values. How many Black children do not know who their father is? That is a major concern." There was no argument from the Black ministers, just consent. Here the Torah is recording the blessing among the Jewish community then and now. We do know our parents and we are unique in this case. (RED)

2. The census for the nation was for Jewish males who were at least 20 years old. This was due to the need to know what our military strength would be. And we were 603,550 strong. For the Levitical census, the count was for Jewish males who were at least one month old. Once they were that age, they were considered to be strong enough to survive. It was also divinely known that this generation will die in the desert. Not so for the Leviyim. They did not participate in the sin of the Golden Calf. Hence they were not subjected to that decree. The tribe of Levi was a special entity within the nation. The Rambam identifies the tribe as the Torah teachers in the nation. But it was not an exclusive character trait for the class. Anybody who felt inclined to teach Torah was entitled to join the privileged category of Bnei Yisrael.

3. The tribe of Levi were drafted to work in the Mishkan, to assist the Kohanim. After all, there were only three Kohanim in the entire nation. The Leviyim were the Honor Guard for the Mishkan (Ramban). This was an honorable detail. It really wasn't necessary to keep the rest of the nation at bay. There was never an occasion that they were threatened by people wishing to illegally enter the

sacred domain. So what was their purpose? Their existence was to give honor to the divine premises. During the Nixon presidency in the United States, the President appointed an Honor Guard to protect the White House. The president's domain was not under a threat of invasion. This Honor Guard was dressed ceremoniously as the occasion dictated, and were inaugurated with great fanfare. But it was for show. Similarly, according to the Ramban, the Leviyim fulfilled the same honor. Giving glory to Hashem!

4. As we mentioned above, the Leviyim were counted at the age of one month. Bnei Yisrael were counted at age twenty to assess our military strength. That number became the Halachic definition of a Jewish nation. In general the Leviyim were exempted from military service. Sometimes they did join army service, as in the case of a defensive war. During the Roman invasion of Yerushalayim in the year 70 CE, the Kohanim were the fiercest fighters; they were the last line of defense of the Holy Temple. There are Kinot that we recite on Tisha B'Av that describe the cruel treatment the Romans reserved for the Kohanim. Under normal conditions the Leviyim trained their young children to guard the sanctity of the Holy Temple (and the Mishkan). Their children were educated to live up to their birthright as Leviyim within the nation of Israel. There definitely is wisdom in the Torah ways of life.

5. Why was the tribe of Levi the smallest of all the tribes of Israel? The Ramban would argue that what separated this tribe was the fact that they were not enslaved in Egypt along with the rest of the Jewish nation. (I believe that this was due to the institution that Yosef initiated during the famine in Egypt. Yosef exempted the priests of Egypt in not becoming serfs to the Pharaoh.) According to the Ramban, since the tribe of Levi were not enslaved, they never received the Berachah of family multiplication like the rest of the nation. He also added that their Berachah was quality, and not quantity. The Brisker Rav (Rav Chaim Soloveitchik, my Rebbe's grandfather, 19th century Poland) said that the small number of the tribe of Levi was because Bnei Yisrael had to support the Leviyim, who did not receive a territorial heritage in Israel. Keeping Levi smaller was a divine blessing for the rest of the nation. Hashem had mercy for the economic resources of Israel.

6. The Pidyan HaBen has its explanation in this Parshah. For each of the Jewish firstborn, the father would give the Kohen five shekels. The Rama (in Y.D. 305:10) states that the father cannot appoint a Shaliach (a messenger) to represent him in the Pidyon HaBen ceremony. The Shach and the Taz disagree with the Rama. The Vilna Gaon (Rav Eliyahu Kramer, 18th century, Vilna) brings a proof from our Parshah to support having a Shaliach. The fathers gave the money to Moshe,

who gave the money to the Kohanim. So we see that there can be a Shaliach. What about a case where the father is in the hospital or in prison and cannot perform the ceremony? What can happen then? Could the father appoint the rabbi or a Beit Din to represent him in the ceremony? I believe that most people would favor the opinion that permits a Shaliach, at least in these cases. (I was approached by a middle-aged man who came to me and said that he is a firstborn and his parents never knew about a Pidyon HaBen. What can be done? I explained that he is required to do it for himself, no matter what age he is. And so it was.)

7. And Elazar was given the job of carrying all the oil and incense in the desert. Let us examine this verse. That would be 183 lug (over 14 gallons) for the year plus the incense for the whole year as well. One way to understand this is that Elazar was in charge of this task, but he delegated the job to carry the load in the desert. The eternal light in the Mishkan, the western lamp of the Menorah, was miraculously kept lit. So we will not include that in our calculation. Allow this to be a lesson for us all. Being in charge of a task means that you are responsible for getting the job done. It does not mean that you have to do the job all by yourself. Delegating the tasks at hand involves trusting others to do the job. It is not avoiding the job. But it does mean that you need to oversee the performance to make sure that the job gets done correctly. That was Elazar's job during the travels in the desert.

QUESTIONS FOR PARSHAT BAMIDBAR 5786

I. From the Text

1. On what calendar date was this census taken? (1:1)
2. What was the largest tribe among Bnei Yisrael? (1:27)
3. From what age were the Leviyim counted? (3:15)
4. Of the three sons of Levi, which was the oldest? (3:21)
5. Who received the 5 shekel for each unmatched firstborn of the tribe of Levi? (3:48)

II. From Rashi

6. What was the minimum age for a Jewish man to be a soldier in the Jewish army? (1:3)
7. Why were Aharon's sons listed as if they were Moshe's sons also? (3:1)
8. How could Moshe count the Levitical babies when the mothers could be nursing them? (3:16)
9. In describing the work of the Leviyim, the Torah tells us that the Leviyim work from the age of 30. Later (8:24), the Torah states from the age of 25. Explain the discrepancy. (Rashi on 8:24)
10. Who supervised the tribes of the three Levitical families while in the desert? (4:16)

III. From the Rabbis

11. The name of the prince of Shimon was Shelumiel ben Tzurishaddai. He had another name recorded much later in the Torah. What was his other name? (Chizkuni)
12. How did the Leviyim assist the Kohanim in the service in the Holy Temple? (Malbim)
13. If the firstborn son's father is a Levi, there is no Pidyon HaBen. What is the Halachah if the son's mother is the daughter of a Levi?

IV. Midrash

14. The Midrash connects the position of Reuven in the Camp of Israel with Esav. What did Reuven and Esav have in common?

V. Haftorah Machir Chodesh. Samuel I

15. To whom was Yonatan (son of King Shaul) talking to in the beginning of the Haftorah?

VI. Relationships

16.
 - a) Korach ben Yitzhar - Korach ben Uziel
 - b) Binyamin - Menasheh
 - c) Yov - Yashuv
 - d) Zevulun - Sered
 - e) Yaakov - Dinah

ANSWERS FOR PARSHAT BAMIDBAR 5786

1. On 1 Iyar of the 2nd year since the Exodus.
2. Yehudah
3. From the age of one month.
4. Gershon
5. Aharon and his sons.
6. 20 years of age.
7. Because Moshe taught them Torah.
8. Moshe came to the tent and stayed outside, and a Heavenly voice would inform Moshe as to the count of the nursing babies.
9. At the age of 25, the Leviyim became apprentices. At age of 30, the Leviyim began working on their own.
10. For Kehat: Elazar. For Gershon and Merari: Itamar
11. Zimri ben Sallu, whom Pinchas killed at the end of Parshat Balak.
12. They would sing and play instruments.
13. Again there is no Pidyon HaBen
14. Both were firstborn males who lost their birthright.
15. To David
16.
 - a) First Cousins
 - b) Uncle Binyamin
 - c) Same person, son of Yissachar
 - d) Father Zevulun
 - e) Father Yaakov

