



D'var Torah Bamidbar – May 20, 2023

By Sandy Remz

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Today's parsha focuses on the census of the tribes of Israel
- B. While I will touch on some numbers in passing, I am going to focus a bit on miracles and then turn to the topic of tribalism.

II. THE NUMBERS

A. First, the numbers:

- 1. Bottom line: The census counted 603,550 males aged 20 and up to be precise
- 2. This census was conducted one year and one month after *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, leaving another 38 years of wandering in the Midbar
- 3. Assuming the relative accuracy of that number, and you can accept it or not and accounting for spouses (let's assume one spouse per adult man) and assuming a birth survival rate of something like 2 children per fertile woman, that results in a total of over 2 million members of B'nei Yisrael wondering around the Wilderness for 38 more years

B. MIRACLE

- A. Therein lies the miracle: How did over 2 million people survive for a total of 40 years in the barren, inhospitable, wasteland of the Sinai, which today hosts only a tiny population.

- B. Of course, one explanation might be that the Midbar back then wasn't a desert, that it was relatively fertile and our image of it was all wrong.
- C. But, as tradition has it, the survival of so many people for 40 years could only be attributed to a miracle, delivered in particular in the form of daily manna 6 times a week and attributable, in general, to G-d's loving, sheltering protection.
- D. RanbaN (Nachmanides) goes further and tells us to focus on not just survival in the Midbar, but the miracle of our existence after surviving slavery in Egypt and pestilence and plague preceding the census. And that indeed since then, the Jewish people have continued to survive in spite of decimation through suffering and persecution. All of this is attributable to G-d's grace and miraculous powers.

C. Tribalism

- A. Far be it from me to quibble with RamBaN and the other sages, but I see what might have been an even greater miracle: That is how all of the separate tribes -- which had started out as a dysfunctional family of 12 brothers and then over the generations grew to more than 2 million people -- managed to find common purpose, so much so that after fleeing Egypt together and (at least for the Next Gen) surviving the Midbar, they then managed to unify under Joshua to conquer and settle the Promised Land. That was the most challenging accomplishment of all because -- unlike (i) the Exodus where G-d acted directly and (ii) unlike the miracle of surviving 40 years in the Midbar -- the settlement of the Promised Land was in their hands and involved human agency without direct intervention by G-d.

B. Definitions of Tribalism

1. Tribalism: (i) "tribal consciousness and loyalty, *especially*: exaltation of the tribe above other groups" (Merriam Webster) or (ii) "strong in-group loyalty"
2. Tribe: (i) "a social division in a traditional society consisting of families of communities linked by social, economic, religious, or

blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader” (Oxford/Google). (ii) alternative definition from M-W reflecting a more contemporary usage: “a group of persons having a common character, occupation or interest”

3. Tribes embodied the first human communities that formed beyond primal bonds of kinship, that is the family unit. Earlier humans banded together to survive. A person was defined by their tribe. That led to a vastly different sense of identity than what we think of today, at least in what we regard as Western Civilization.
4. Tribes preceded our modern post-Enlightenment sense of individualism and self. But many people today who may be viewed as members of a “tribe” in modern parlance, whether through a commonality of political, ideological, consumer, social or other interests, may also view banding together in a tribe as necessary for survival –whether mere physical survival, survival as a race, or survival of belief.
5. And, therein lies a key element of the seemingly world-wide polarization that we are experiencing today. If you are not in my Tribe, then you are the Other. That strong sense of Tribalism is associated with the inability or unwillingness to try to understand the Other or see the Other as a person like yourself.

D. Now Back to *Bamidbar*

A. Census is being conducted by tribe.

B. Purposes:

1. First, to determine size of available fighting force - By TRIBE, since units would be formed by TRIBE
2. Second, to determine configuration of *B'nei Yisrael* BY TRIBE in assembling around the *Mishkan* with their designated leaders in assigned places – like trying to figure out seating at a wedding.

C. One may wonder: Was tribal identity so strong in the approximately 86-116 years that *Bnei Yisrael* were enslaved in Egypt? While the bloodlines may have been there, were tribes able to function as one would expect? Did they have recognized tribal leaders, as is integral to a tribal form of organization? One can only speculate, but presumably enslavement over multiple generations would weaken the bonds and cohesion of tribes.

D. In any event, at the time of our parsha, 1 year and 1 month after liberation, the tribal structure is the basic form of organization of *Bnei Yisrael* under the protective shelter of G-d and his prophet Moshe.

1. Thereafter, in the book of Bamidbar, the tribal organizational structure only seemed to be reinforced and develop further. For example:

a. *Naso* – Offering upon dedication of *Mishkan* made by tribe-by-tribe

b. In *Bamidbar*, as in the rest of the Torah, I believe it to be the case that anytime an individual is introduced, he or she is identified by tribal affiliation.

c. *B'not Tzelafchad* – after the death of Tzelafchad leaving only daughters as survivors, the inheritance issue tied up in tribal matters.

E. Settlement of the Promised Land

A. With that said, under Joshua, what may be viewed as the pinnacle of ancient Jewish unity (and arguably the paradigm of Jewish unity for all time) was realized when all of the tribes came together as one with a common purpose of settling the Promised land. At that, it took some negotiation with the tribes of Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe to cut a deal to ensure that everyone fought all for one and one for all.

B. Even then, after the conquest and settlement, it was not as if the tribes were assimilated into one blended group of people we call Jews. Tribal

identity was a primary organizing principle. The land was divided and allocated by tribe.

VII. Descent into Tribalism

- A. The glory of the settlement of the Promised Land was followed by an unfortunate history of disunity and disaster connected primarily by tribalism, whether in the traditional sense or in our more contemporary understanding, which might be termed extreme factionalism.
 1. The period of Judges was marked by dysfunctional, tribal factionalism, which then led to demands for a king.
 2. A Brief period of the United Monarchy followed by divided Monarchy after the death of Solomon brought on by politics, cultic differences, tribal differences and familial dysfunction
 3. That culminated in Exile in 722 from North, 586 from Judea
 4. Forward to Hasmoneans/ Maccabees – fleeting period of glory followed by disastrous infighting, less tribalism than fratricide.
 5. According to the Rabbis *Sinat Chinam* (causeless hatred) led to the Churban (destruction of Beit HaMikdash) and Exile – infighting among, not biblical tribes, but internal factions.
 6. Almost 2 millennia of Galut – Jewish powerlessness, exile, persecution, yearning for redemption. BUT that also gave rise to the development and, in many cases, flourishing of diverse communities.

A. Israel

1. Tragically, it then took the Shoah for us to see the establishment of *Midinat Yisrael* in 1948
2. At that, even prior to its formation, severe and even fatal factionalism, reaching the level of almost primitive tribalism reared its ugly head, as reflected in two notable, infamous events
 - a. Unsolved murder – apparent political assassination -- of Social Zionist leader Chaim Arlosoroff in 1933

- b. *Altalena*, in June 1948, one month after Israel declared independence, when Ben Gurion ordered the newly formed IDF to fire on the ship brought to the shores of Tel Aviv by the Irgun (Etzel) with tragic results, though to his credit Begin forbade a civil war
 3. And in its brief history since its founding, indeed soon thereafter, Israel has been beset by factionalism/tribalism. You all know the fault lines, though of course they have shifted over the years. They include, among others:
 - a. Mizrachi (or Sephardi)/Ashkenazi
 - b. Socialists (or generally left)/Revisionists (right)
 - c. Religious (*dati*) / Secular (*chiloni*)
 - d. Arab/Jewish
 - e. Recent immigrants/everyone else
 - f. Tel Aviv/rest of country
 - g. And on and on
 4. Of course, these divisions and the simmering grievances different Israeli sectors or tribes have nursed on all sides (not all without cause) have been boiling over triggered by the current crisis over judicial reforms. (While I have a point of view on that, I will refrain from any commentary.)
 5. *Yom Hazikaron/Yom Haatzmaut*—Nevertheless and notwithstanding fraught times and some notable though minor exceptions that gained attention, people of all (or almost all) tribes within Israel commemorated the solemn day of Yom Hazikaron and then the celebratory day of *Yom Haatzmaut* Marking 75 years since the establishment of Israel, giving reason to hope that there is still a core of unity that will hold. (However, the fact that Yom Yerushalayim, once a day of common unqualified celebration and giving thanks has more recently become divisiveness, marked by political antics and provocative actions, gives me pause.)
- B. Where does that leave us?
- A. *Lo Tigodadu* (Don't gash yourselves, Dvarim 14:1) - interpreted in Talmud Bavli 13b to mean: "Do not make numerous factions. Rather

all are one faction.” Of course, this still allows for diversity of opinions and perspectives, as is made clear by the freewheeling structure of the Talmud itself.

- B. We must embrace the diversity of the Jewish people while promoting unity and combatting tribalism. The same holds true for our own country.
- C. I just hope that it does not require a miracle for the rival tribes today to come together in Israel in order for us to be able to look forward to a bright future for *Midinat Yisrael* and the Jewish people, not to mention our own country right here.