



“The Five Books of Moses:
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

34 Bamidbar—For Love or War?

Text

במדבר א

א וידבר יהוה אל-משה במדבר סיני באהל מועד באחד לח' ד' השני בשנה השנית לצאתם מארץ מצרים לאמרי. **ב** שאו את-ראש כל-עדת בני-ישראל למשפח'תם לבית אב'תם במספר שמות כל-זכר לגלגל'תם. **ג** מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כלי-צא צבא בישראל תפקדו אתם לצבא'תם אתה ואהרן. **ד** ואתכם יהיו איש איש למטה איש ר'אש לבית-אב'תיו הוא. **ה** ואלה שמות האנשים אשר יעמדו אתכם לראובן אליצור בן-שדיאור. **ו** לשמעון שלמיאל בן-צורישידי. **ז** ליהודה נחשון בן-עמינדב. **ח** ליששכר נתנאל בן-צוער. **ט** לזבולן אליאב בן-חל'ן. **י** לבני יוסף לאפרים אלישמע בן-עמיהוד למנשה גמליאל בן-פדהצור. **יא** לבנימין אבידן בן-גדע'ני. **יב** ללוי אחיעזר בן-עמישדי. **יג** לאשר פגעיאל בן-עכרן. **יד** לגד אליסף בן-דעואל. **טו** לנפתלי אחירע בן-עינן. **טז** אלה קריאי (קרואי) העדה נשיאי מטות אבותם ראשי אלפי ישראל הם. **יז** ויקח משה ואת האנשים האלה אשר נקבו בשמ'ת. **יח** ואת כל-העדה הקהילו באחד לח' ד' השני ויתילדו על-משפח'תם לבית אב'תם במספר שמות מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה לגלגל'תם. **יט** כאשר צוה יהוה את-משה ויפקדם במדבר סיני. **כ** ויהיו בני-ראובן בכ'ר ישראל תולד'תם למשפח'תם לבית אב'תם במספר שמות לגלגל'תם כל-זכר מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כלי-צא צבא. **כא** פקדיהם למטה ראובן ששה וארבעים אלף וחמש מאות.

כב לבני שמעון תולד'תם למשפח'תם לבית אב'תם פקדיו במספר שמות לגלגל'תם כל-זכר מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כלי-צא צבא. **כג** פקדיהם למטה שמעון תשעה וחמשים אלף ושל'ש מאות.

כד לבני גד תולד'תם למשפח'תם לבית אב'תם במספר שמות מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כלי-צא צבא. **כה** פקדיהם למטה גד חמשה וארבעים אלף ושש מאות וחמשים.

כו לבני יהודה תולד'תם למשפח'תם לבית אב'תם במספר שמ'ת מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כלי-צא צבא. **כז** פקדיהם למטה יהודה ארבעה ושבעים אלף ושש מאות.

כח לבני יששכר תולד'תם למשפח'תם לבית אב'תם במספר שמ'ת מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כלי-צא צבא. **כט** פקדיהם למטה יששכר ארבעה וחמשים אלף וארבע מאות.

ל לבני זבולן תולד'תם למשפח'תם לבית אב'תם במספר שמ'ת מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כלי-צא צבא. **לא** פקדיהם למטה זבולן שבעה וחמשים אלף וארבע מאות.

לב לבני יוסף לבני אפרים תולד'תם למשפח'תם לבית אב'תם במספר שמ'ת מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כלי-צא צבא. **לג** פקדיהם למטה אפרים ארבעים אלף וחמש מאות.

לד לבני מנשה תולד'תם למשפח'תם לבית אב'תם במספר שמות מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כלי-צא צבא. **לה** פקדיהם למטה מנשה שנים ושל'שים אלף ומאתים.

לו לבני בנימין תולד'תם למשפח'תם לבית אב'תם במספר שמ'ת מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כלי-צא צבא. **לז** פקדיהם למטה בנימין חמשה ושל'שים אלף וארבע מאות.

לח לבני דן תולד'תם למשפח'תם לבית אב'תם במספר שמ'ת מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כלי-צא צבא. **לט** פקדיהם למטה דן שנים ושל'שים אלף ושבע מאות.

מ לבני אשר תולד'תם למשפח'תם לבית אב'תם במספר שמ'ת מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה כלי-צא צבא. **מא** פקדיהם למטה אשר אחד וארבעים אלף וחמש מאות.



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מב בני נפתלי תולד תם למשפח תם לבית אב תם במספר שמ ת מן עשרים שנה ומעלה כ ל י צא צבא. **מג** פקדיהם למטה נפתלי של שה וחמשים אלף וארבע מאות. **מד** אלה הפקדים אשר פקד מ שה ואהרן ונשיאי ישראל שנים עשר איש איש אחד לבית-אב תיו היו. **מה** ויהיו כל-פקודי בני-ישראל לבית אב תם מן עשרים שנה ומעלה כ-י צא צבא בישראל. **מו** ויהיו כל-הפקדים ש-מאות אלף ושל ש אלפים וחמש מאות וחמשים. **מו** והלויים למטה אב תם ל א התפקדו בתוכם. **מח** וידבר יהוה אל-מ שה לאמר. **מט** אך את-מטה לוי ל א תפקד ואת-ר אשם ל א תשא בתוך בני ישראל. **נ** ואתה הפקד את-הלויים על-משכן העדת ועל כל-כליו ועל כל-אשר-לו המה ישאו את-המשכן ואת-כל-כליו והם ישרתהו וסביב למשכן יחנו. **נא** ובנס ע המשכן יורידו א תו הלויים ובחנת המשכן יקימו א תו הלויים והזר הקרב יומת. **נב** וחנו בני ישראל איש על-מחנהו ואיש על-דגלו לצבא תם. **נג** והלויים יחנו סביב למשכן העדת ול א יהיה קצף על-עדת בני ישראל ושמרו הלויים את-משמרת משכן העדות. **נד** ויעשו בני ישראל ככ ל אשר צוה יהוה את-מ שה כן עשו.

Bamidbar 1

¹ On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, saying:

² Take a census of the whole Israelite *eda*-community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. ³ You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who go out to the host. ⁴ Associated with you shall be a man from each tribe, each one the head of his ancestral house.

⁵ These are the names of the people who shall assist you:

From Reuben, Elizur son of Shedeur.

⁶ From Simeon, Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai.

⁷ From Judah, Nahshon son of Amminadab.

⁸ From Issachar, Nethanel son of Zuar.

⁹ From Zebulun, Eliab son of Helon.

¹⁰ From the sons of Joseph:

from Ephraim, Elishama son of Ammihud;

from Manasseh, Gamaliel son of Pedahzur.

¹¹ From Benjamin, Abidan son of Gideoni.

¹² From Dan, Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai.

¹³ From Asher, Pagiel son of Ochran.

¹⁴ From Gad, Eliasaph son of Deuel.

¹⁵ From Naphtali, Ahira son of Enan.

¹⁶ Those are the elected of the assembly, the chieftains of their ancestral tribes: they are the heads of the contingents of Israel.

¹⁷ So Moses and Aaron took those people, who were designated by name, ¹⁸ and on the first day of the second month they convoked the whole *eda*-community, who were registered by the clans of their ancestral houses — the names of those aged twenty years and over being listed head by head. ¹⁹ As the Lord had commanded Moses, so he recorded them in the wilderness of Sinai.

²⁰ They totaled as follows: The descendants of Reuben, Israel's first-born, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, head by head, all males aged twenty years and over, all who were to go out to



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the host — ²¹ those enrolled from the tribe of Reuben: 46,500.

²² Of the descendants of Simeon, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, their enrollment as listed by name, head by head, all males aged twenty years and over, all who were to go out to the host — ²³ those enrolled from the tribe of Simeon: 59,300.

²⁴ Of the descendants of Gad, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were to go out to the host — ²⁵ those enrolled from the tribe of Gad: 45,650.

²⁶ Of the descendants of Judah, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were to go out to the host — ²⁷ those enrolled from the tribe of Judah: 74,600.

²⁸ Of the descendants of Issachar, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were to go out to the host — ²⁹ those enrolled from the tribe of Issachar: 54,400.

³⁰ Of the descendants of Zebulun, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were to go out to the host — ³¹ those enrolled from the tribe of Zebulun: 57,400.

³² Of the descendants of Joseph:

Of the descendants of Ephraim, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were to go out to the host — ³³ those enrolled from the tribe of Ephraim: 40,500.

³⁴ Of the descendants of Manasseh, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were to go out to the host — ³⁵ those enrolled from the tribe of Manasseh: 32,200.

³⁶ Of the descendants of Benjamin, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were to go out to the host — ³⁷ those enrolled from the tribe of Benjamin: 35,400.

³⁸ Of the descendants of Dan, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were to go out to the host — ³⁹ those enrolled from the tribe of Dan: 62,700.

⁴⁰ Of the descendants of Asher, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were to go out to the host — ⁴¹ those enrolled from the tribe of Asher: 41,500.

⁴² [Of] the descendants of Naphtali, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were to go out to the host — ⁴³ those enrolled from the tribe of Naphtali: 53,400.

⁴⁴ Those are the enrollments recorded by Moses and Aaron and by the chieftains of Israel, who were twelve in number, one man to each ancestral house. ⁴⁵ All the Israelites, aged twenty years and over, enrolled by ancestral houses, all those in Israel who were to go out to the host — ⁴⁶ all who were enrolled came to 603,550.

⁴⁷ The Levites, however, were not recorded among them by their ancestral tribe. ⁴⁸ For the Lord had spoken to Moses, saying: ⁴⁹ Do not on any account enroll the tribe of Levi or take a census of them with the Israelites. ⁵⁰ You shall put the Levites in charge of the Tabernacle of the Pact, all its furnishings, and everything that pertains to it: they shall carry the Tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall tend it; and they shall camp around the Tabernacle. ⁵¹ When the Tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the Tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up; any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death. ⁵² The Israelites shall encamp group by group, each man with his division and each under his standard. ⁵³ The Levites, however, shall camp around the Tabernacle of the Pact, that wrath may not strike the Israelite eda-community; the Levites shall stand guard around the Tabernacle of the Pact. ⁵⁴ The Israelites did accordingly; just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so they did.

Context

The Book of Bamidbar opens with the census-taking of the men among the Israelite nation. Each one who is twenty years and older counts. For each tribe, a person is appointed to take responsibility for the census, recording each person according to his tribal lineage. They compute the total of each tribe and the total of all the tribes together. The families of the tribe of Levi are counted separately because of their special functions. Every person has an assigned



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place in the array of the tribes around the Mishkan-sanctuary—marked by a standard. The Levites replace the firstborn children from all of the tribes in the sacred service. Transport and care of each part of the Tabernacle, assembly and dis-assembly are assigned to specific Levite families. Everyone else is to keep a safe distance from the lethal dangerous sacred materials.

Explorations

The Book of Bamidbar is mainly occupied with the tumultuous transition from slavery toward homecoming. Our parasha, the first one, prepares for the adventurous desert crossing. The newly freed people face a vast, open expanse in which people can easily lose their bearings and their way as they wander. The parasha arrays the nation in fine detail, each person occupying a precise location in his tribe, and places each tribe relative to the other tribes, all clustered around the Tabernacle at the inner core of the People. These arrangements give a comforting sense of order and belonging in an intimidating desert.

Most of the parasha deals with enumerating the People, their names, leaders, and lineages, and assigning their traveling and camping arrangements. The purpose is to organize the Israelite nation and appoint positions and duties as it sets out toward the Promised Land. This interpretation depends on assumptions about the meaning of key Hebrew phrases. It also leaves open the question about women's participation and leadership in the community. Where are the women?

At the outset, the text calls upon Moshe to take the census using a Hebrew phrase, “raise up the head of every person in the entire community of Israel”, the whole *eda*. *Eda* is an ambiguous word used variously, sometimes interpreted to include and at other times to exclude women. The word *eda* shares the root of witness—the collectivity that bears witness to the divine. In our parasha, this root appears again in reference to the Mishkan-Tabernacle of Testimony, a name derived from the tablets of testimony-*edut* housed within it (Bamidbar 1:50, 53). These tablets bear witness to the divine-human covenant. For the rabbinic sages, *eda* is a key concept in defining the minimum quorum for public prayer, a *minyan* (Brakhot 21b, Megilla 23b). There are 149 instances of *eda*, congregation, in 140 verses in Tanakh. Here are a few examples of where the word seems to straightforwardly include women:

“They journeyed from Elim, and all the congregation (*eda*) of the Children of Israel came into the wilderness of Sin, which [is] between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after departing out of the land of Egypt” (Shmot 16:1).

Is it possible to conceive that the women did not journey with the men?

It came to pass, as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation (*eda*) of the Children of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of God appeared in the cloud (Shmot 16:10). Did the women did not witness this divine epiphany?



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There was no water for the congregation (*eda*) and they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron (Bamidbar 20:2).

Did the women have water and not the men?

Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation (*eda*) drank, and their beasts [also] (Bamidbar 20:11).

The men and the beasts drank, but the women did not?

Take a census of the whole Israelite *eda*-community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. (Bamidbar 1:2)

About our parasha that speaks of the community-*eda*, we can similarly ask a rhetorical question, Are the women part of the community as it prepares for the journey to Israel?

Our verse proceeds to specify “every male, head by head”, that is, one by one. Except for another additional few references to the entire *eda*, the parasha seems to refer exclusively to men. All of the census-takers are men, the chieftains of the ancestral tribes, heads of the “thousands”. Among the Levites, though general plural language is potentially gender inclusive, the text specifies repeatedly that every male over one month is called to serve, and all of the people appointed are men (3:15-39). Furthermore, only the males are to be counted among the firstborn (3:40). Though obviously none of the tribes consist only of men, women and children seem to be transparent, invisible to the census. It is impossible to determine what women's places are in this Bamidbar ordering of the camp.

One reason that the omission of the women is ignored and/or tolerated is because readers commonly assume that the purpose of the census is military—for the conquest of the land. The Jewish Publication Society translates an expression that recurs throughout the parasha (in verses 1:3, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42 and 45), כָּל־יֹצֵא צֶבֶא - *kol yotzei tzava*, “all who were able to bear arms.” Most readers presume that women are not to be called to serve in the army, to prepare for conquest. Based on this misguided assumption (Yael impales the Canaanite general Sisra—Judges 4; Yehudit beheads Holofernes, the Syrian-Greek general—Book of Judith), this view disposes readers to accept women's absence from the census. The interpretation that women are excluded because the purpose of the census is military leaves open the possibility that women are included in the *eda* for other non-military purposes. Nonetheless, this interpretation implicitly conjoins military service with authority and worthiness for public representation and leadership.



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While the word *tzava* in contemporary Hebrew translates as *army*, there is no convincing evidence that our parasha has any military intentions whatsoever. Indeed, there are many cases throughout the Tanakh where *tzava* is used otherwise.

As is his custom, Ramban takes issue with Rashi's assumption that the intention of the census is military. He suggests that *tzava* refers to a responsible or auspicious gathering of the nation and gives examples that are completely unrelated to the military—for the service of the Tent of Meeting (Bamidbar 8:24, 25) and the heavenly hosts (Devarim 4:19), for example. Ramban reads the census as lifting the heads of the Israelites toward positive ends (Ramban on 1:3). Indeed, Rashi himself comments on the first verse of the parasha that God counts Her people on various occasions as an expression of endearment.

Among the usages of the term, *tzava* occurs in a statement about the Levites later in the Book of Bamidbar. From the age of twenty five, they shall come "*litzvo tzava—to comprise a host* for work in the Tent of Meeting" (Bamidbar 8:24). Another important case is the copper mirrors the women hosts bring as an offering to the Mishkan, "*mar'ot ha-tzov'ot asher tzavu*"—we discussed this passage in our unit on Parshat Vayakhel (Shmot 38:8).

My translation of *kol yotzei tzava*, “*all who go out to the host*,” leaves the purpose of the census open. Aside from the common military intention, two salient possibilities are

1. functions connected with the sacred service, and
2. fulfilling the mission to go to the Land of Israel.

From our perspective, none of these purposes justifies women's absence from the census.

Questions for Discussion

- In your view, what is the purpose of the census in our parasha, Bamidbar?
- There is no question that most human cultures have been excluding women from full participation and leadership in the public sphere for millennia. Women number fewer than 17% of the current US Congress. Explore how a critical feminist perspective about counting women affects your relationship with the Torah—its sacredness, authority, relevance? How does this critical perspective empower you to critique life contexts such as work, school, government, industry, and society altogether etc.?
- According to the American constitution, the president is also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Over decades, many Israeli prime ministers and high-ranking politicians are former high-ranking army officers. Evaluate the effects of the overlap of military and political power—in the Torah, and in our societies.
- In the contemporary social order, are women's roles prescribed and/or limited by (in)visible



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structures and invisibility? What does this mean for women's social roles and choices today? Consider the current protest and debates about the exclusion of women from the Israeli public (see links below).

- What are the benefits and risks of living in an ordered society in which each person occupies a specific assigned location according to her/his gender, class, ethnic, social, hereditary, or religious status? How does this approach compare with your experience of your family and society?
- Discuss your views about women serving in the military—in combat, in public sacred service, and in leading nations through transitions.

Study Links

Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb describes an important moment in her feminist journey when she attended Elie Wiesel's class, “Heros of the Bible” and raised the question, “What about the women?” Lynn recounts the event in the [introduction to her book](#), *She Who Dwells Within: Feminist Vision of a Renewed Judaism* that bears the title—“What about the women?” [Here](#) is a blog entry about her book.

See Ismar Schorsch's [commentary on parshat Emor](#) where he discusses the meaning and significance of *eda*.

Catriel Sugarman writes [here](#) in *The Jewish Voice and Opinion: Promoting Classical Judaism* about the innovation in Orthodoxy to create a minyan that counts men and women, “Partnership Minyanim”: Orthodoxy on the Edge (or Maybe Even a Bit Over).

“A [US] military advisory commission is recommending that the Pentagon do away with a policy that bans women from serving in combat units, breathing new life into a long-simmering debate.” See the full text [here](#). Read [this slightly dated but serious discussion](#) of women's combat service in the Israel Defense Forces.

The exclusion of women from the Israeli public has drawn world attention in recent times. See [this New York Times essay](#). [Here](#) is a blogger's critical response to the essay.

Summary of Issues

While most assume that the purpose of census-taking is to appraise the military capability of the Israelite camp as it journeys through the desert, there is no clear evidence that the purpose is not sacred service. The transposition of war for sacred service affects the assignment of gender roles and justifies the exclusion of women from central community functions.



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Methods & Observations

Lists of names and heads of tribes, genealogies—these are the kinds of passages that many tend to skip over in the Torah. Compared with narrative and legal passages, they don't seem to bear much meaning or insight; there is no gripping story-line or character development. Inspecting these lists, we find important information about the community in the desert and who counts. We also learn more about hidden values that guide translators and interpreters whose assumptions are particularly visible when they deal with dry lists.

Contact

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