

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Post of Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Bemidbar
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פרשת במדבר
ה' בסיון תשע"ח

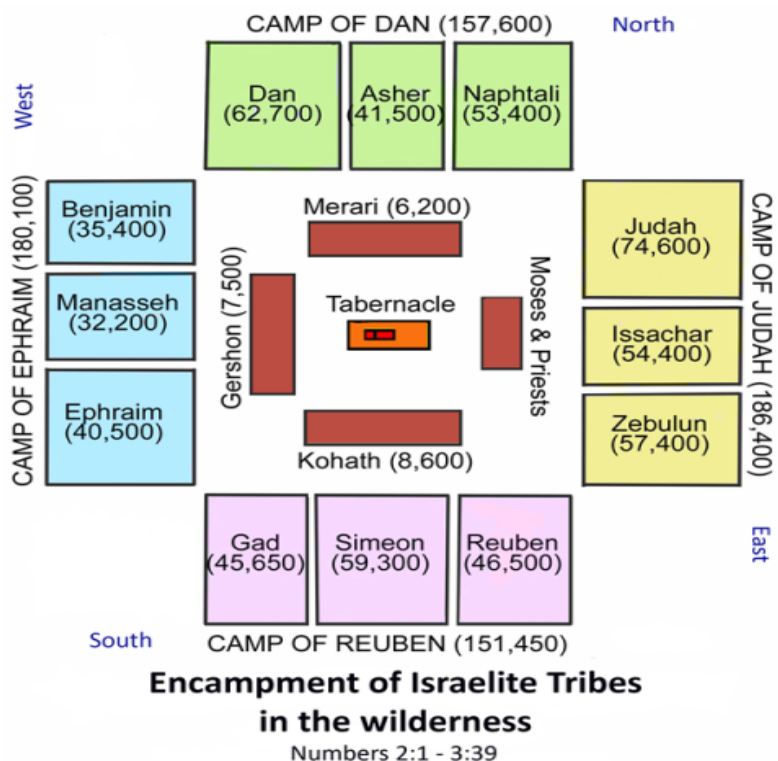
Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 1:1-4:20

In this *parasha*, Moshe conducts a census of the Israelites and the Levites, and sets up the structure of the wilderness encampment; Hashem describes the unique duties of the Kehati family from which the *cohanim* (priests) come. This week's *parasha*, *Bemidbar*, begins the fourth of the five Books of Moses. The book of *Bemidbar* focuses on the forty years of the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness.

The Israelites' camp was set up as follows (population numbers in parentheses):

In the center was the *Mishkan* – the Tabernacle or Sanctuary – literally “the dwelling place [of God].” This was where it needed to be for both pragmatic and philosophical reasons. Pragmatically, it had to be equally accessible to all of the tribes. Philosophically, God belongs in the center of the Jewish community.

Immediately surrounding the *Mishkan* in the center of the camp were the dwellings of the *levi'im*, and those of the *cohanim* and Moshe. The *cohanim* conducted the service in the Sanctuary, and the *levi'im* carried different parts of the portable



Tabernacle. The descendants of Merari carried the beams; those of Gershon carried the curtains, and those of Kehat carried the holy vessels.

The outermost ring of the camp was inhabited by the twelve tribes. The placement of each tribe was determined carefully based on two aspects of its status: whether its namesake was the child of one of Yaakov's wives, Rachel or Leah, or one of his maidservants, Bilhah or Zilpah; and whether he was his mother's first born or where he came in the birth order of the succeeding sons.

On the south side was Reuven, the first born of Leah; Shimon, the second born of Leah; and Gad, the first born of Bilhah, Leah's maid.

On the north was Dan, the first born of Zilpah; and Naftali and Asher, the other two sons of the maidservants.

On the west (the rear of the camp) were Ephraim, Menashe, and Binyamin, the three tribes descended from Rachel.

On the east side (at the front of the camp and leading in the direction of travel) resided Yehudah, the leader of the camp and Leah's fourth born son (Levi was the third born), together with his two younger brothers, Yissachar and Zevulun.

This was a logical configuration. Members of the tribe of Yehudah and of the Yosef tribes, Ephraim and Menashe, were leaders of the people. (Much later in Jewish history, after the reign of Shlomo (Solomon), Judea would split into two kingdoms, known as Yehuda and Ephraim.) Most commentators believe that when the Bnei Yisrael traveled, they traveled in the same configuration in which they camped. As they were moving east most of the time, this put Yehuda in front and Ephraim/Menashe defending the rear.

Each tribe lived within its own camp under its own flag, so although the Jews had one encampment, it actually contained a close amalgamation of twelve distinct tribes.

We can learn an important lesson from this. Although we at MILTON believe in *Am E Chad* – one nation – we also celebrate the diversity of our own “tribes.” We should never forget that there are many ways to be Jewish, and we need to continue to embrace everyone around the “*Mishkan*” of service to God.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What other reasons might explain why the *Mishkan* was in the center of the camp?
- Why do you think that the *levi'im* and Moshe and the *cohanim* lived separately from each other and apart from the rest of the camp?
- What do you think it must have been like living in the encampment in the wilderness? What do you think would have been the most difficult thing about it? What do you think would have been the most fun?