

PARSHAT BAMIDBAR  
NUMBERS 1:1-4:20  
HAFTARAH I SAMUEL 20:18-42  
27 IYAR 5783/18 MAY 2023



*Judean Mountains*

## BEWILDERING

The Book of Numbers, in Hebrew the Book of “In-The-Wilderness,” *BaMidbar*, has, to me, a disorienting sort of temporal arc to it, among other disorientations. The English/Christian name for this book, Numbers, is derived from the ancient Hebrew name *Chumash Ha-Pekudim*, The Book of Mustering [Mishnah Yoma 7:1; Mishnah Menachot 4:3.] referring to the military census at the beginning and near the end of the book. The Hebrew root p-k-d means both “counting” and “absence.” My thoughts below are indebted to Aviva Zornberg, in her *Bewilderments*)

1. Numb. 1:2-3 “Add up the heads of all of the congregation of Israel by their families, by their fathers’ houses, with the number of names of every male by their heads. From twenty years old and up, everyone going out to the army in Israel.”
2. Manna means “What is it?” “The manna was absorbed by the body and metabolized as pure energy.” (Talmud, B.Yoma 75b) “The people complain that the un-namable food is *ein kol*—that is, totally absorbed (*akul*) in the body. The people complain: Can a human being bring in (food) without eliminating (waste)?” (Zornberg, paraphrasing Talmud)
3. “This [Wilderness] landscape does not yield ... the basic demand for direction, for markings to indicate a human mapping of blank space. No human steps have trod this sand, it stares back at the traveler indifferently—pathless, bewildering to the human imagination.” (Zornberg, p. xii)

Note: Most translations are from “Commentary on the Torah” by Richard Elliot Friedman, 2003.

4. Numb. 13:28: “Nonetheless [*efes*, which also means zero] the people who live in the land are strong” “The Spies, with one word—*efes*, zero—obliterate their report of the “goodness” of the Land.” (Zornberg p. xv). Numb. 14:32: “Your carcasses shall drop in this wilderness, while your children roam the wilderness for forty years, suffering for your faithlessness, until the last of your carcasses is down in the wilderness.”
5. Deut. 8:15 “[God] led you in the great and terror-ful wilderness of fiery snake and scorpion and thirst, where there is no water,”
6. “Numb. 16:32-34: “and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households and all the people who were with Korah” ...“And all Israel that was around them fled at the sound of them, for they said, “Or else the earth will swallow us.”
7. After the episode of Pinehas and before the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, another census is enumerated, and at the end of that enumeration: “God had said of them, “They shall die in the wilderness.” Not one of them survived, except Caleb, son of Jephunneh, and Joshua son of Nun.” While we weren’t paying attention **every adult (man) died**. (Numb. 26:65).