

Reliving Revelation

Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement, JTS



This commentary was prepared for the author's informal weekly email to the Women's League Seminary Synagogue community.

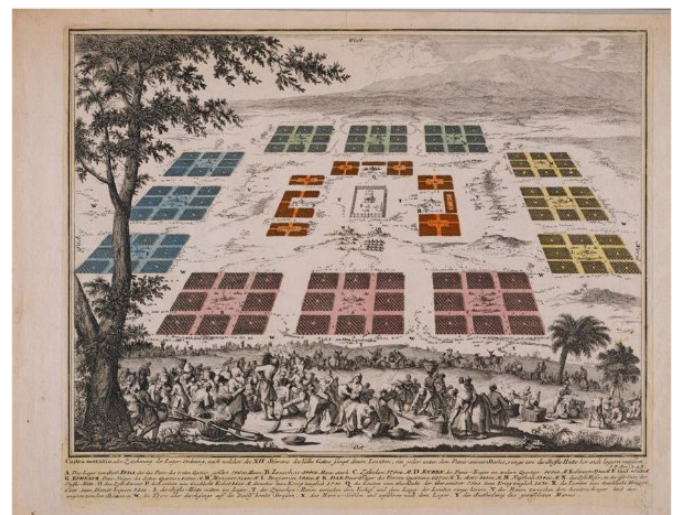
The fourth book of the Torah ("Bemidbar Sinai") begins with a census of the (male) heads of clans among the Israelites in the second year of their freedom. And then, it lays out the pattern according to which the 12 tribes and the religious functionaries (*levi'im* and *kohanim*) are to set up camp in the wilderness. When you read it, you are struck by the attention to detail and good order, something which is rather typical in documents with a priestly source.

There is an aspect to that template for establishing camp that can escape attention but has fascinated me for some time. Imagine that you were able to take an aerial photo of the Israelite camp at one of its wilderness stations. What would you see? According to our text, you would see a holy site at the center (the Mishkan), so sacred that it is off limits to all but a select few. And emanating from the altar at that center is a column of smoke that never goes out (as Leviticus 6:6 requires). Surrounding that holy precinct are Moses and Aaron, and the remainders of the clans of the religious leaders of the people. And finally, in an outer concentric circle, you would see the various tribes of the Israelites, constituting the *goy kadosh*, the holy people of which Exodus 19:6 spoke.

What is noteworthy about that "skycam" photo? It is just what an aerial shot of the day of revelation at Mount Sinai would have looked like(!): the holy people surrounding the mountain; an inner ring with the *kohanim*; Moses, Aaron and a few others of their clan even further in; and finally, an all-but-untouchable mountain peak at the center, exuding smoke like the "smoke of a kiln." The Israelite camp was

constructed to be a replica of Mount Sinai on the day of revelation.

In other words, the apparently dry instructions at the beginning of Bemidbar are actually a prescription for a most important religious practice. It is captured in the imperative "Zakhor," which Abraham Joshua Heschel understood not as a mere intellectual activity of recall, but as the practice of putting oneself back into a foundational spiritual experience. It is to *be* at Sinai, in addition to simply remembering the story of what happened there. And extending that, we can say that bringing all of the spiritual moments in our lives with us on our journeys is a crucial prescription that we are given in this fourth book of the Pentateuch. Since it is also the final Shabbat before the celebration and reenactment (through late night study) of the revelation on Shavuot, the lesson it brings with it should particularly command our attention.



Jan Luyken, *Castra metatio (Camp Formation)*.
Amsterdam, 1700.

Finding Direction to Move Forward with God

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

This Shabbat opens the fourth book of Torah known as *Sefer Bemidbar*, the book of Numbers. Though in Hebrew, the title translates as “the Book of the Desert,” alluding to the desert wanderings of the people, the standard English translation is “Numbers,” referring to the census that is commanded to the Israelites at the beginning of the narrative: “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: Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses” ([Num. 1:1-2](#)). Rashi, the prolific medieval biblical commentator, notes, “it is out of Divine affection for Israel that God seeks to count them at every hour.” This notion of affection or love plays out beautifully in our parashah and in these days leading up to Shavuot, the holiday in which we mark the giving of Torah.

Joseph Bekhor Shor focuses his opening comments on the map of the Israelite encampment. The first verse of our parashah

refers to a month after the raising of the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was finished and the days of its dedication had passed along with the ordering of sacrifices. God then warned them concerning impurities—that they should not desecrate the Tabernacle. God also commanded them here to count the troops that would be stationed around the King; this refers to those who were fit to wage battle. They were divided under four banners so that they would be encamped from four directions. This is the way to show honor to a king: his ministers and servants surround him and the king is in the middle.

And so the placement of the tribes is anything but random. As the Bekhor Shor points out, such a layout reflects the honor due to a king. More than that, this encircling of the

Tabernacle reminds one of the bride making her way seven times around the groom (and today it is often true of the groom encircling the bride). Such a gesture is one of both knowledge and love. To go around something is to know its essence.

Our exegete’s comments dovetail well with Midrash Tanhuma. This collection of rabbinic legends portrays the giving of Torah as the *engagement* of God and the Israelites. The day on which the Tabernacle is raised represents the *wedding* between the two. And now, the setting up of the encampment plays on this same imagery: the Israelites placing themselves around their beloved. Sadly, we often lose sight of God in our daily lives. We forget to be more conscious of the direction in which we orient ourselves; and we turn our backs on the Divine Presence. Parashat Bemidbar and the Bekhor Shor remind us that we must be attentive to the way we design our daily encampments—at once being cognizant of the four directions outward and deriving inspiration from our beloved inward. Only then can we (humanity) and God move forward together.

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