

## Counting as a Spiritual Practice: Bemidbar and the Road to Shavuot



Dr. Marcus Mordecai Schwartz, Ripps Schnitzer Librarian for Special Collections  
and Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS

Every year, without fail, we read Parashat Bemidbar just before the festival of Shavuot. This liturgical pairing is more than a scheduling convenience; it offers a profound insight into the spiritual architecture of Jewish time. Bemidbar begins with a count: “Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans, by ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head” (Num. 1:2; **בְּמִסְפָּר שְׁמוֹת (לְגִלְגֵּלָתָם)**). This act of counting seems administrative on the surface, but like so much in the Torah, its spiritual depth lies beneath.

To count is to care. The medieval commentators understood this. They noted that God counts Israel repeatedly, not out of forgetfulness, but out of love. Just as one counts prized possessions to ensure their safety, so too does God count the people. In this parashah, the census occurs in the second month of the second year after the Exodus. The Tabernacle has just been completed. The nation is being prepared to journey. But before the people can move, they must be numbered. Identity and presence are confirmed through number.

The act of counting in Bemidbar is not simply an exercise in data gathering. It is a ritual. The Mishnah (Menahot 10:3) teaches that “the *omer* offering [on the second day of Passover] permits the new grain for consumption” (**מִשְׁקֵרֶב (עֹמֶר הַתִּרְהָה חֹדֶשׁ בַּמִּדְבָּר)** and it sets into motion the ritual of *sefirat ha-omer*, the counting of the days between Pesah and Shavuot. Day by day, we make our way from liberation to revelation. Counting marks the movement from chaos to covenant.

So too with the *bikkurim*—the first fruits. These were brought to the Temple specifically on Shavuot, as instructed in Deuteronomy 26 and Leviticus 23:17, which refers to the “day of first fruits” (**יוֹם הַבִּכּוּרִים**). Shavuot thus marks not only the giving of Torah, but also the moment when the agricultural firsts of the land were dedicated to God. Mishnah Bikkurim chapter 3 describes how the farmer, upon seeing the first fig or pomegranate ripen in the field, ties a reed around it and declares, “This is *bikkurim*” (**הִרִי אֵלַי (בִּכּוּרִים)**). A simple act of noticing becomes a moment of sanctification. It is an act that unites the personal and the communal, the agricultural and the spiritual. When the time comes, the farmer brings those fruits to Jerusalem, with song, procession, and thanksgiving.

Both the *omer* count and the *bikkurim* involve numbers, but they also involve narrative. They mark transitions: from slavery to freedom, from wilderness to Torah, from potential to fulfillment. They are structured rituals of awareness. Counting days or tying a reed around a fruit are not ends in themselves. They are practices of mindfulness, of spiritual attention.

This is not a modern overlay. The Torah itself associates the wilderness, the *midbar*, with the condition for revelation. In the midrashic imagination, God chose to give the Torah in a place that belonged to no tribe, no nation. The *midbar* is ownerless. To enter it, to be counted in it, is to renounce claim and embrace vulnerability.

Ritual counting, then, is a paradox. It affirms the value of each individual (“head by head”—**לְגִלְגֵּלָתָם**) while simultaneously pulling the individual into a greater whole.

The medieval commentators saw this as well. When the Levites are counted separately, it is not to marginalize them but to elevate them—to mark their distinct role in the sacred center. Counting, in this view, is not flattening but differentiating.

And yet, the Torah also warns against certain kinds of counting. Later, King David will count the people without proper cause or offering, and a plague ensues. The Talmud (Berakhot 55a) teaches that blessing does not dwell on that which is measured or counted or weighed, but only on that which is hidden from the eye: **אין הברכה מצויה אלא בְּדָבָר הַסְּמוּי מִן הָעֵין**

Why count at all? The answer lies in the intent. In Bemidbar, the counting is commanded by God, mediated by Moses and Aaron, and connected to the building of a holy community. It is not an assertion of control, but an invitation to responsibility. Each name is recorded not for its statistical value, but for its sacred role.

Consider the Levites. They are counted not from age 20 like the rest of the tribes, but from age one month (Num. 3:15; **פָּקֵד אֶת־בְּנֵי לֵוִי (מִבֶּן חֹדֶשׁ וּמַעֲלָה . . . פָּקֵד אֶת־בְּנֵי לֵוִי** 3:15; and again from ages 30 to 50 for those performing the labor (Num. 4:3; **מִבֶּן שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וּמַעֲלָה**). These multiple censuses show that even within the sacred, there are layers of function, readiness, and service. Counting here is attuned to context and capacity.

The Mishnah (Menahot 10:5) notes:

**מִשְׁחָרְבַּת בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ . . . סוֹפְרִין אֶת הַיָּמִים**

“From the day the Temple was destroyed, no longer do we bring the *omer*, but we still count the days.”

Ritual can outlive structure. The frame remains even when the content shifts. Our counting preserves the aspiration.

In the same way, Mishnah Bikkurim 3 describes how groups of pilgrims would ascend to Jerusalem, flute players leading the way, chanting Psalms. Each step of the journey was part of the offering. The counting, the tying, the walking, the declaring—it was all a kind of liturgy. Notably, the Mishnah

gives detailed accounts of both the *omer* count and the *bikkurim* rituals. These descriptive layers are not merely instructional; they are themselves a form of counting. The Hebrew root **ס.פ.ר**. (s-f-r) carries this dual meaning: it signifies both counting (as in **סְפִירָה**, *sefirah*) and telling or narrating (as in **סִפֵּר**, *sipper*). A number is not only a quantity, but a story. To count is to name, to recall, to witness. The linguistic richness deepens when we recall that in Arabic, the cognate root s-f-r means “to travel” or “to journey.” Thus, counting, telling, and traveling are bound together by language. Every *sefirah* is both a tally and a tale. And each step from Egypt to Sinai—whether marked by grain, fruit, or word—is a passage worth retelling.

Today, our own spiritual lives can feel unmeasurable. We rarely mark progress in clear increments. But Jewish ritual, especially in this season, offers tools to make time visible and sacred. Counting the *omer*. Marking the first fruit. Reading Bemidbar.

Counting is not sterile. It is intimate. When the Torah opens with a census, it is opening with a question: Will you see yourself in the count? Will you make yourself count? Will you step forward, name by name, heart by heart?

The wilderness is not a void. It is a vessel. And counting is the practice that fills it. It makes room for memory, expectation, and commitment. As we stand between Egypt and Sinai, between Bemidbar and Shavuot, we count not only days but possibilities.

May we learn to count in this way—not to limit, but to lift. Not to calculate, but to consecrate. And may the act of counting lead us, once again, to the place where we heard a voice that spoke from fire, saying: “You are counted. You matter. You belong.” **אֵתָהּ נִמְנָה. יֵשׁ לָךְ עֵרָה. אֵתָהּ שִׁיךְ—**