

Census D'var Torah

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## **Bamidbar**

Shabbat Shalom.

Reading this week's portion, I recall my Outward Bound solo at 16 years old, where I found myself alone for three days in the Sierra Nevada Mts with just a handful of trail mix and a tarp. In the wilderness, I spent much of the three days thinking about who were the people in my life that I loved and missed the most...up until a bear came and visited me... and then even more so (with desperation) I thought about who might be around to help.

Today we began the third book of the Torah entitled Bamidbar, meaning literally "in the wilderness." Like many of you, I have clocked hours in the outdoors, but also in the wilderness of transition and change that our Torah portion speaks of today. In fact, I am standing here today to celebrate and to speak precisely because I am myself in a wilderness of transition--about to get married, and move back to Los Angeles to continue with my studies to become a rabbi.

Through Bamidbar we come to understand **what and who our most valuable resources are, and it is the "wilderness" experience that facilitates our deep understanding of this.**

Our first line of the Torah portion Bamidbar teaches...

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי

**God spoke to Moses in the *wilderness* of Sinai** ...after they came out from the land of Egypt

Furthermore, "The Rabbis taught [in Midrash Numbers Rabbah]: The Torah was given within the context of three things—fire, rain and *wilderness*...From where do we know that the wilderness played a role? As it says (in the first line of today's Torah portion): 'And God spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai.'"

In other words, wilderness is important because it is the precisely the place that God chooses to speak, where we grow into ourselves, and can receive unexpected

gifts. The writer Christina Baldwin wrote, "The only map that does us any good is the one that leads us to the center." The wilderness, whether that of forest or soul, leads us on an important internal journey.

The Torah invites us today to think back and remember when we felt like we were in the wilderness- a time of transition or change when we were looking for the way through. Maybe that time is right now, or when you lost a close friend or relative, when you ended a job, received a diagnosis, an unexpected disappointment, or a new opportunity. *Pause.*

And in this space, the Torah calls on us not to run or hide, but to *count*:

: ב שָׂאוּ אֶת-רֹאשׁ כָּל-עַדְת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם ...

## 2. [Literally- "Lift up the head of" or] Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, by families...

Who is in your life when you are in the wilderness? In the backcountry we are forced to count and to name our resources, including our most valuable resource, simply, the people in our lives. The strength of the wilderness experience in its capacity for growth comes when we are companioned by others who don't try to rescue us but to journey with us. In today's Torah portion, according to the 11th Century commentator Rashi, God wants to count the Israelites precisely to show God's love for them. The intention of the census is love, not resolution or summation. And what I have learned this year through my own transitional, wilderness year *is* this amazing love that comes with proximity to family in liminal spaces-- I took a year off of school to assay this new family.<sup>v</sup> And indeed, as I am heading into marriage next weekend, I have already become apart of this family. To Nate, to Bob and Marcia, to my parents, relatives old and new, friends, colleagues, and the HEA community, I want to thank you for being the ones who have walked with me through this wilderness.

Shabbat Shalom