

The Hebrew name for the book we have just begun is *Bamidbar*, in the wilderness. Indeed, the Israelites have been in the wilderness, figuratively as well as literally, and they still have far to go. But before they resume their journeys, they must be organized by tribe and clan. To this end, no fewer than five censuses are taken, starting with men 20 and above to form an army. Their legions, under the banners of their respective tribes, are assigned specific locations surrounding the *mishkan*, which determine the order in which they will travel. The tribe of Levi is not counted in these first two censuses, and its encampment is situated closest to the *mishkan*, forming a barrier between it and the encampments of the other tribes. The Levites are dedicated to the service of HaShem in lieu of the firstborn (3:11-13, and Exodus 13:1-2). According to Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 3:5 "... initially the service was performed by the firstborns. Because they sinned with the calf, the Levites merited to take their place because they did not err with the calf. ... [However] the verse 'they shall be mine' [3:13] teaches that they [firstborns] require redemption." This is the *mitzvah* of *pidyon haben*, redeeming the firstborn son with a sum of money, as outlined in 3:46-51. Children whose father is a Kohen or Levite, or mother is the daughter of one are exempt. Consequently, Levite males are counted from the age of one month, and because of their special duties, which also include conveying the laws of Torah to the people, they are exempt from military service, and are sustained not by land inheritance, but by the people's tithes and offerings. Of the three sons of the patriarch Levi, Kohath, the middle son and grandfather of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, is ranked highest. Whereas the Gershonites are responsible for the exterior of the *mishkan*, and the Merariites for its outer framework, the Kohathites serve in the holy interior and take care of all its furnishings. At the end of our parashah and at the beginning of Parashah Naso next week, the three branches of the Levite families are once again counted, this time from the age of 30 until the age of 50, for service. This reflects the value system for determining the monetary dedications in last week's parashah (Leviticus 27:2-7), which is further elaborated in Pirke Avot 5:21: "... at five years [study of] Scriptures; at 10 [study of] Mishna; at 13 [fulfillment of] *mitzvot*; at 15 [study of] Talmud; at 18 for marriage; at 20 for pursuit; at 30 for physical strength; at 40 for understanding; at 50 for [giving] counsel; at 60 [he attains old age]; at 70 fulfillment of years; at 80 [he attains] spiritual strength; at 90 he bends over [the grave]; at 100 it is as if he were already dead and departed from the world." In other words, service in and around the *mishkan* requires a maximum of physical strength as well as a comprehensive education and a deep sense of responsibility. For the Kohathites this is as dangerous as it is important. "Do not cause the tribe of the Kohath families to be cut off from among the Levites. Do this for them, so they should live and not die, when they approach the Holy of Holies. Aaron and his sons shall first come and appoint each man individually to his task and his load. They shall not come in to see when the holy [vessels] are being wrapped, lest they die." (4:18-20) When the *mishkan* was dismantled before each journey, the ground on which it had stood lost its holiness, but its sacred interior, which held the Ark of the Covenant, along with the table, menorah, altars, utensils, and framework was so imbued with holiness that only Aaron and his sons, i.e., the High Priests, were permitted to dismantle and wrap it for the journey. Only after they had completely covered everything were the Kohathites permitted to come and carry them, "but they shall not touch the sacred objects, for [then] they will die." (4:15) According to the Ramban (Nachmanides), "since the holiness of Sinai resides in the *mishkan* between the *cherubim*, the Levites were warned not to break through to see the Eternal until the priests remove the veil, for then the glory is seen in the hiding of His power, and it returns to its place in the Holy of Holies." It is noteworthy that the Hebrew word used here for wrapped, כָּבַל is derived from the root בלע, which means to swallow/engulf, with overtones of destruction – the same word used to describe the demise of Korach and his followers in chapter 16. The extreme precautions taken to shield the people from this supernatural power before the Revelation at Sinai, and later, the tragic deaths of Aaron's two eldest sons are just two illustrations of the mortal danger inherent in venturing too close to holiness without explicit authorization. Even behind the barriers, the people were so engulfed in the holiness of Sinai that they experienced sensory overload; they saw the thunder and the sound of the shofar (Exodus 20:15), and recoiled in fear. Nadav and Avihu are eaten (אכל – to eat, consume) by HaShem's fire (Leviticus 10:2), although curiously, their bodies remain, to be carried by their tunics out of the *mishkan*. Citing their deaths, Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 5 points out that familiarity with holiness can lead to flippancy. Holiness can also lead to rivalry, as we will see in the story of Korach. Talmud Tractate Yoma 22a teaches that the lottery system for the privilege of removing the ashes from the altar was initiated after one priest pushed another, who fell and broke his leg. And holiness can be distorted by extreme fundamentalism, which continues to plague us today. How appropriate that in this final week of Omer Counting, Shabbat is preceded by the *sephira* of *tiferet* (the beauty of balance) in *malchut* (HaShem's presence on earth). Indeed, when we approach holiness with balanced awe, tempering our enthusiasm with restraint while always being mindful of our tremendous responsibility as partners in our eternal covenant, we can safely and joyfully experience and participate in its true essence.

Shabbat shalom!