

SEFER BAMIDBAR - INTRODUCTION

[**Note:** The first section of questions deals with **Sefer Bamidbar** in general; the second section contains questions for **Parshat Bamidbar**.]

PART ONE - FINDING A THEME

Our shiurim thus far have been based on the assumption that each sefer of Chumash should be studied a 'prophetic composition' - i.e. each book was written by God to deliver a certain message to the people of Israel (and not simply to provide us with historical information). Therefore, we study each book in search of its primary (and sometimes secondary) themes.

[We based this assumption not only on 'common sense', but also on the very fact that many commentators (such as Ramban and Seforno) attempt to identify that theme in their introductory commentaries to each book.]

The following battery of questions will reflect a methodology that helps the student identify the underlying theme for Sefer Bamidbar (and basically for any book in Tanach). It will also help you appreciate the opinions raised by the various commentators in regard to its overall theme.

We begin with some general questions to think about, which highlight thematic considerations. Afterward the questions will become a bit more 'rigorous'.

PART ONE - Questions to 'think about'

1. In your opinion, is Sefer Bamidbar a continuation of Sefer Vayikra? If so, explain how and why.

If not, explain why it is not.

Could it be considered a continuation of Sefer Shmot?

If so, explain why.

According to your answer, why does Sefer Bamidbar start where (and when) it does? [In other words, why does it begin with a census taken on the first day of the second month in the second year?]

What was the last topic discussed in Sefer Shmot?

Do we have any indication for when the mitzvot in Sefer Vayikra were given? [Note for example Shmot 40:17 (in relation to Vayikra 1:1), Vayikra 7:37-38, 16:1, 25:1.]

2. From your previous knowledge of Sefer Bamidbar, can you suggest a common theme for the entire Sefer (or at least for most of it)? In other words, what is the primary topic of its narrative and/or its mitzvot?

If you did identify any specific theme, how does it relate to the themes of Sefer Shmot and Sefer Vayikra?

If you can't identify a common theme, explain which details make it difficult to reach a conclusion?

Can you identify at least any distinct 'units' or general topics?

3. Recall how the books of Breishit and Shmot contained primarily 'narrative', i.e. an ongoing story), while Sefer Vayikra contained primarily mitzvot (commandments).

In your opinion, does the style of Sefer Bamidbar seem to be more like Sefer Shmot (story and some mitzvot) or Sefer Vayikra (mostly mitzvot)?

Re: the stories in Sefer Bamidbar, do they appear to be simply a random collection, or do they share a common theme? Do they divide into any distinct groups?

Likewise, re: the mitzvot in Sefer Bamidbar, when were they given and do they share any common theme?

4. In your opinion, had Bnei Yisrael not sinned during their journey in the desert, would there have been a need for Sefer Bamidbar?

If not, explain why not.

If so, what would have been its primary topic?

PART TWO - Preparation questions for intro. shiur

[Part Two will keep you quite busy, but it will help you arrive at more precise conclusions for the above questions.]

1. Our goal (as usual) is to compose a 'Table of Contents' for Sefer Bamidbar, which will help us identify its primary topics and their progression.

Before you begin, attempt to compose a Table of Contents (or outline) for Sefer Bamidbar based solely on your previous knowledge of the book. Be as concise as possible, i.e. it shouldn't be more than 15-20 lines long. Based on your outline, can you identify an overall theme?

2. Next, we will construct this same outline, but this time a bit more carefully. To do so, start with a blank sheet of paper, on which we will dedicate one line for each chapter (and when necessary - sometimes two or three lines for chapters that contain more than one primary topic (e.g. chapter 15).

Quickly scan each chapter, and attempt to write a short phrase that summarizes its primary topic. Note as well whether the primary topic is a story (narrative) or a mitzva. [For example, for chapter one, you could write - counting the tribes; for chapter six - the laws of Nazir; for chapter 16 - the story of Korach's rebellion.] Be as brief as possible; the idea is not to read the entire book, rather just to review it to get the general picture.

[Ideally, it would best to dedicate one line for each 'parshia', but as that would probably take too long, one line for chapter will usually suffice. However, for chapters 5,6, 9,10,15, and 27 it is recommended that you dedicate one line for each parshia instead of one line for the entire chapter.]

3. When you have completed your list for all 36 chapters, take your list and group together any chapters that share a common topic, and give a name for that common topic. For example: chapters 1 thru 4 could be 'counting & organizing the camp', while for chapters 22 thru 24 you could simply write the story of Bil'am.

Those common topics now become the 'headers' of each section of your outline. If several of these 'common topics' can group together, then you've found a general topic - which can become a sub-title for a certain section of your outline.

If possible, continue this process in an attempt to identify a title for your entire outline - if so, you've found the primary theme of the Sefer.

4. As you review your outline, attempt to identify the progression of topic. Can you explain where (and why) there are certain sections where the topic does not seem to flow logically?

Notice in your outline how there are several transitions from 'stories' to 'mitzvot'. In those transitions, does the flow of topic usually make sense? If not, can you explain why?

5. To clarify the point raised by the last question, review your outline once again, this time paying careful attention to whether each topic is either a narrative (story) or a mitzva (a commandment).

Then, if it is a mitzva, make note if it is a 'mitzva le-dorot' - i.e. a commandment that applies to future generations, or a 'mitzva le-sha'a' - i.e. a one-time commandment given only for that generation in the desert.

Then, make a new list, this time writing down **only** the narratives and the mitzvot le-sha'a, while **leaving out** any topic that is a mitzva le-dorot, i.e. which does not form an integral part of the ongoing narrative.

Now, take this second list (i.e. the one without the mitzvot le-dorot) and turn it into an outline (as before), and identify its primary topics. Does its flow of topic make more sense than the flow of topic in your first outline? If so, can you explain why?

How would you title this new outline?

6. Next, construct a separate list for all of the parshiot of "mitzvot le-dorot" - i.e. the ones which you 'filtered' out of your original list.

In your opinion, are these mitzvot in any way connected to one another? Are any of these mitzvot thematically connected in any matter to the narrative in Sefer Bamidbar? If so, explain how.

Can you find any similarities between these mitzvot and the mitzvot found in either Sefer Shmot or Sefer Vayikra?

7. In your opinion, when do you think that these mitzvot were first given to Moshe Rabbeinu? In other words, were they given early, when Moshe was on (or at) Har Sinai; or were they given at different times during the journey through the desert, i.e. at the same time that they are recorded in Sefer Bamidbar?

Do any of these mitzvot seem to continue topics that had already been discussed earlier in Chumash? Are any of these mitzvot 'repeats' from earlier in Chumash?

Is there one category that seems to be common to most of these mitzvot? If so, where else in Chumash have we found mitzvot relating to that category? Can you suggest a reason why these mitzvot are recorded in Sefer Bamidbar instead?

8. Finally, see Ramban's introduction to Sefer Bamidbar (before his commentary to Bamidbar 1:1). At first glance, some of Ramban's conclusions appear to be rather strange. Based on your analysis of the Sefer, attempt to explain how (and why) Ramban reached those conclusions. What question does Ramban leave unanswered?

See also Seforno's introduction to Sefer Bamidbar (if not found in the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar, then you will find it in his introduction to Chumash, before Sefer Breishit).

9. Based on your answers to the above questions, can you explain why we find so many 'drashot' that attempt to explain the juxtaposition between certain parshiot in Sefer Bamidbar?

[For example, why the laws of 'para aduma' (chapter 19) were recorded before the story of the death of Miriam (chapter 20), or the questions that Korach asked re: the need for 'tzizit' in a garment that was made out of pure 'techelet' (see end of chapter 15).

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PARSHAT BAMIDBAR

PART I - QUESTIONS FOR THE 'SHABBOS TABLE'

WHO'S COUNTED or WHO COUNTS!

1. Chazal refer to Sefer Bamidbar as 'Chumash ha-**pkudim**'. Based on the use of this word in Parshat Bamidbar, what is the meaning of this name? [See for example 1:3 & 1:19.]

Are you aware of any other words in Hebrew that imply 'counting'?

To the best of your recollection, are there any other places in Sefer Bamidbar where we find the word 'pkudim' or the 'shoresh' 'p.k.d.' (in any context)? If so, what does the word mean in each example? [See for example 26:51-52.]

Review 27:12-23, noting especially 27:16! What does the word 'yifkod' imply in this context, and how does it relate to the meaning of this word in chapter one?

Based on the meaning of "lifkod" in chapter 27, can you suggest a deeper meaning of this word for chapter one? Can this help explain why it may be the first chapter of the book? [Relate your answer to the theme of Sefer Bamidbar as discussed in the Intro to Sefer Bamidbar questions (above).]

Finally, see Ramban's commentary on 1:3 in regard to the phrase 'tifkodu otam'.

BIBLICAL NAMES

2. In 1:4-15 we find twelve examples of Jewish names from the time period of Yetziat Mitzrayim. [In other words, the leaders who are chosen in chapter one were given their names several decades earlier, when Bnei Yisrael were still enslaved in Egypt. Note as well that we find twelve more examples of names at the beginning of Parshat Shlach (see 13:1-16).]

Review those names, noting how most of them are based on a combination of two Hebrew words, and attempt to understand the meaning of each.

How many of these names include God's Name in one form or another? Can you explain why? [Do most of these names sound Hebrew, or do any of them seem to be Egyptian?]

Which of God's Names do you find in these names?

Which Name of God is **not** found in these names?

Can you explain why?

Relate to Shmot 6:2-4 and to Bamidbar 13:16!

Review Bamidbar 13:16, noting how Moshe 'changes' Hoshea bin Nun's name to Yehoshua. Based on these questions, can you explain the deeper meaning of this name change, and more specifically - the use of 'yud.key' for God's Name?

CARRYING THE MENORA

3. To the best of your recollection, what method was used to carry the 'keilim' [vessels] of the mishkan (when traveling)? [Relate to the 'badim' [poles] described in Parshat Teruma.]

Do you remember how the Levi'im were supposed to carry the 'menora'? Did the **menora** have a place to insert "badim" [poles], as did the other vessels of the mishkan?

Now, see Bamidbar 4:9-10! Does this answer the question? [How come, you never noticed this before?]

A DANGEROUS JOB

4. Review 3:1-4, noting how the Torah goes out of its way to mention the death of Nadav and Avihu when counting the kohanim. How does this specific explanation of how and why they died (see 3:4) relate to the primary responsibility of the Levi'im, as described in the next set of psukim (i.e. 3:5-10)? Relate as well to 1:48-53 and to the special warning in 4:17-20!

Finally, relate this to the tragic story that takes place in II Shmuel chapter 6.

MAKING SENSE OF THE CENSUS

5. Sefer Bamidbar opens on the first day of the second month with God's commandment to take a census. What was the purpose of this census? [Support your answer.]

How does this relate to the **date** of the commandment?

[Relate to 10:11-28! / See Rashbam & Seforno on 1:2]

How does this relate to **who** is counted?

How does this relate to the theme of Sefer Bamidbar?

Towards the end of Sefer Bamidbar we find that another census is taken in the fortieth year (see 26:1-52).

In what manner are these two censuses similar? In what manner are they different? [Compare them carefully!]

What is the purpose of the second census? [Relate to 26:52-56 (as well as 26:1)!] Is it for the same reason as the first census?

Use your answer to explain the differences between them.

PART II - QUESTIONS FOR PREPARATION (for weekly shiur)

1. What is the first general topic of Parshat Bamidbar (which is in essence the first topic of Sefer Bamidbar)? How does this topic relate to the theme of Sefer Bamidbar (based on your answers in the 'introduction section')?

2. Considering that all the 'shvatim' are to be counted, in what order would you expect the Torah to list them?

What was their order in Parshat Shmot (1:1-4)?

How many times are the shvatim listed in Parshat Bamidbar, and in what order? [Note 1:20-42 & 2:3-30.]

Can you explain why the order is different each time?

3. Review chapter two once again, and note the **four** tribes who are chosen to **lead** each group of three. What is special about the forefather of each of these four tribes?

How does this help you answer question #2 above?
[If you have time, see Ramban on 2:3.]

4. As you review chapter two, note how two additional tribes join each 'leadership' tribe to form a 'three tribe brigade'. Attempt to explain the logic for which tribes are added to each leader. For example, can you explain why specifically **Gad** 'jumps camp' from the group with his brother **Asher** to the camp of **Reuven & Shimon**? [How are Gad and Reuven related?]

5. In your opinion, is there any significance in the manner by which the shvatim travel through the desert with the mishkan at the center of their camp?

Can you relate this to the purpose of this journey?
In what manner is it similar to Ma'amad Har Sinai? [See first Ramban on Sefer Bamidbar.]

PART III - PARSHANUT

1. According to the pasuk -"ish al diglo be-**otot** le-beit avotam..." (2:2), each tribe is to have a 'flag' showing its special 'ot'. In your opinion, what type of 'otot' were these?

See Rashi on 2:2, noting that he offers two explanations, one based on the stones of 'choshen' (described in Shmot 28:15-21), and one based on Yaakov Avinu's funeral procession from Egypt (see Breishit 50:12). Attempt to explain the reason for these two commentaries, and how each understands the word 'ot' in a different manner.

Next, see Ibn Ezra, noting how he offers a different explanation of what these 'otot' were; then see Ramban, noting how he first quotes Ibn Ezra and then **adds on** a few important lines to Ibn Ezra's peirush. Explain this based on Ramban's intro to Sefer Bamidbar, and his understanding of 'kabbala'.

Finally, see Chizkuni, noting how he too offers two explanations. The first - a totally different explanation for the 'otot' on the flags, based on the actual 'letters' of the names of the **avot**; while the second seems to be a combination of earlier commentators.

Explain the underlying reason for these two commentaries.

2. At the beginning of chapter 3, the Torah first describes Aharon's family, from the day that God first spoke to Moshe Rabbeinu on **Har Sinai**. Based on the flow of the parshiot in Parshat Bamidbar, can you explain the nature of this statement, and why **Har Sinai** is mentioned (in contrast to Midbar Sinai in 1:1)?

Based on the parshiot that follow, what else is difficult about the wording of 3:1? [Relate to the mention of Aharon & Moshe in this pasuk.]

See Rashi, how does he relate to these questions? Then see Rashbam, noting how he answers these questions in a totally different manner.

Attempt to understand how this reflects two different approaches to 'parshanut'.

Next, see Ibn Ezra. Note how he also deals with the same two questions, but offers a completely different explanation (than Rashbam or Rashi). Try to understand what problems in the pasuk lead Ibn Ezra to his conclusions.

Finally, see Ramban, noting how (and why) he first quotes Rashi, and then adds an additional note. [Would you say that Ramban disagrees with Rashi, or is he 'adding' to his peirush?]

Then note how Ramban offers a different peirush 'al derech ha-pshat...'. Be sure that you understand how that peirush is different than Rashi's and why Ramban refers to this as pshat, even though he would not necessarily disagree with Rashi's statement.

3. In Bamidbar 9:1-8 we find an event that took place on the 14th day of the first month, while the opening pasuk of Sefer Bamidbar (1:1) records an event which took place two weeks later on the

first day of the second month! Hence, Sefer Bamidbar appears to be 'out of (chronological) order'.

First, see Rashi, Ramban, Ibn Ezra, & Sforno (on 9:1), noting how each commentator offers a different explanation.

As this pasuk seems to provide a very strong proof for the opinion of 'ein mukdam u-me'uchar...' [Chumash does not necessarily follow in chronological order], how does Ramban (who holds 'yesh mukdam u-me'uchar') deal with this problem?

How does Rashi's 'shtita' of 'ein mukdam...' affect his interpretation?

Why do you think that Ibn Ezra considers this 'parshia' as a continuation of the dedication ceremony (i.e. chapters 7-8)?

Note especially the final line in Sforno's peirush. Based on this Sforno, how would you explain his approach to 'ein mukdam u-me'uchar'? Is his approach more similar to Ramban's or to Rashi's? See also Rashbam on 1:1.

4. Note that the population of shevet Levi is (proportionally) much less than any of the other shvatim. Note also that they are counted from a much younger age!

Re: why they are counted from age 30 days, see Chizkuni 3:15.

Re: why their numbers are so small, see Ramban on 3:15.

Note as well that the number of first born of Bnei Yisrael (approx. 22,000 from age 30 days and above) appears to be much less than would be expected from a population of 600,000 males (age 20 & above).

[Assuming that half of the male population would be under the age of 20, there would be one first born for every 50 people, and hence an average family size of 50!]

See Ramban on 3:45, noting how he relates to and solves this problem! Note also how explains why this 'transfer' of kedusha to the Levi'im doesn't take place until this time.

be-hatzlacha,
menachem