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:

The march of the Israelites through the wilderness, from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land, will take them through hostile environments, both natural and human. To meet those dangers, the people must be organized into a military camp, which requires a census.

1. In ancient times, the first day of each month was a holiday that provided an opportunity to bring the people together for important announcements.

wilderness Hebrew: midbar; it does not mean “desert.” Although the scant rainfall in the Sinai cannot support agriculture, it can provide adequate pasturage for flocks.

The LORD spoke . . . in the Tent of Meeting
As Moses had been permitted to ascend to the

This fourth book of the Torah is known as “Numbers” in English, because of the census recorded in the opening chapter. In some Rabbinic texts it is called “The Book of the Census” (Seifer Ha-P’kudim). Its proper Hebrew designation, from its first significant word, is B’midbar (In the Wilderness of), and it describes a people wandering through a spiritual as well as a geographic wilderness.

What must it have been like to experience the transition from the grand events of Sinai and the Sea of Reeds to the daily routine of the wilderness? The answer might lead us to the lesson that life is lived, not so much in the grand moments as in uncelebrated ordinary times. In Numbers, the focus of leadership passes from the prophet Moses to the priest Aaron, perhaps because the prophet issues great demands from the mountaintop, whereas the priest is involved with the people in the complexities and routines of daily life.

Throughout this book, the Israelites, who had experienced the Exodus, the crossing of the sea, and the revelation at Sinai, are described as a petulant, complaining people, constantly trying the patience of God and of Moses. In Hirsch’s words, B’midbar contrasts “the people of Israel as it actually is” to “the ideal to which it was summoned in Va-yikra.”

The generation of the wilderness dies off in the course of the 38 years covered by this book. At its conclusion, a new generation of Israelites who had never known slavery, a generation for whom the revelation at Sinai was tradition rather than personal experience, stands poised to enter the Promised Land.

CHAPTER 1
This first parashah deals mainly with two subjects: the census of Israelite adult males in preparation for the battles to reach and conquer the Promised Land, and the physical arrangement of the various tribes as they marched and as they camped.

1. in the Tent of Meeting “The LORD transferred the divine Presence from Sinai to the tabernacle, from a sanctuary established by God to one fashioned by the people Israel. The tabernacle was a portable Mount Sinai, the heavens transplanted and brought down to earth” [B. Jacob]. The Israelites never felt lost in the wilderness because they were able to focus on the tabernacle at the center of their encampment.

The Jewish calendar arranges for these opening chapters of the Book of Numbers (which begin with God speaking to the people in the wilderness of Sinai) to be read in most years on the Shabbat before the festival that celebrates the giving of the Torah, Shavu•ot. According to the Sages, this should remind us that the Torah was given in a wilderness, a place accessible to all, a site that belonged to no one person, and that it was given to a people with no real property and few possessions. “One should be as open as a wilderness to receive the Torah” [BT Ned. 55a]. It is intimidating to open oneself to the demands of God, to a new and morally de-
Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms. Associated with you shall be a man from each tribe, each one the head of his ancestral house.

These are the names of the men who shall assist you:

From Reuben, Elizur son of Shedeur.

Presence of God atop the mountain, so might he enter the Tent of Meeting—a Mount Sinai on earth, so to speak. The Lord’s voice came from within, from between the two cherubim facing each other atop the Ark.

The census described here follows the procedures of censuses in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. It even uses the same terminology. The census was indispensable for military conscription and for any government levy on persons or property. From 10:11, it is clear that the census was completed in less than 20 days.

The age of conscription in ancient Israel. No upper limit is given here.

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These are the names of the men who shall assist you:

From Reuben, Elizur son of Shedeur.
6From Simeon, Shelumiel son of Zuri-shaddai.
7From Judah, Nahshon son of Amminadab.
8From Issachar, Nethanel son of Zuar.
9From Zebulun, Eliab son of Helon.
10From the sons of Joseph:
   from Ephraim, Elishama son of Ammihud;
   from Manasseh, Gamaliel son of Pedahzur.
11From Benjamin, Abidan son of Gideoni.
12From Dan, Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai.
13From Asher, Pagiel son of Ochran.
14From Gad, Eliasaph son of Deuel.
15From Naphtali, Ahira son of Enan.
16Those are the elected of the assembly, the
chieftains of their ancestral tribes: they are the
heads of the contingents of Israel.
17So Moses and Aaron took those men, who
were designated by name, 18and on the
first day of the second month they convoked the whole
community, who were registered by the clans
of their ancestral houses—the names of those
aged twenty years and over being listed head by
head. 19As the L ORD had commanded Moses,
so he recorded them in the wilderness of Sinai.
20They totaled as follows:

The descendants of Reuben, Israel’s first-born, the registration of the clans of their an-
cestral house, as listed by name, head by head,
all males aged twenty years and over, all who
were able to bear arms—21those enrolled from
the tribe of Reuben: 46,500.
22Of the descendants of Simeon, the regis-
tration of the clans of their ancestral house, their
enrollment as listed by name, head by head, all males aged twenty years and over, all who
were able to bear arms—23those enrolled from the
tribe of Simeon: 59,300.

18. and on the first day The date of verse
1 is repeated to emphasize that the census was be-
gun on the very day it was commanded.
were registered Hebrew: va-yityaldu; liter-
ally, “declared their lineage,” according to their
households and clans (Onk., Targ. Jon.).

20. Israel’s first-born Reuben’s title is given
to account for the fact that he heads the list even
though Judah is to lead the march (see 1 Chron.
5:1–2).
24 Of the descendants of Gad, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms—

25 those enrolled from the tribe of Gad: 45,650.

26 Of the descendants of Judah, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms—

27 those enrolled from the tribe of Judah: 74,600.

28 Of the descendants of Issachar, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms—

29 those enrolled from the tribe of Issachar: 54,400.

30 Of the descendants of Zebulun, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms—

31 those enrolled from the tribe of Zebulun: 57,400.

32 Of the descendants of Joseph:

33 Of the descendants of Ephraim, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms—

34 those enrolled from the tribe of Ephraim: 40,500.

35 Of the descendants of Manasseh, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms—

36 those enrolled from the tribe of Manasseh: 32,200.

37 Of the descendants of Benjamin, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms—

38 those enrolled from the tribe of Benjamin: 35,400.

39 Of the descendants of Dan, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms—

40 those enrolled from the tribe of Dan: 62,700.
Of the descendants of Asher, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house, as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms—those enrolled from the tribe of Asher: 41,500.

[Of] the descendants of Naphtali, the registration of the clans of their ancestral house as listed by name, aged twenty years and over, all who were able to bear arms—those enrolled from the tribe of Naphtali: 53,400.

Those are the enrollments recorded by Moses and Aaron and by the chieftains of Israel, who were twelve in number, one man to each ancestral house. All the Israelites, aged twenty years and over, enrolled by ancestral houses, all those in Israel who were able to bear arms—all who were enrolled came to 603,550.

The Levites, however, were not recorded among them by their ancestral tribe. For the Lord had spoken to Moses, saying: Do not on any account enroll the tribe of Levi or take a census of them with the Israelites. You shall put the Levites in charge of the Tabernacle of the Pact, all its furnishings, and everything that pertains to it: they shall carry the Tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall tend it; and they

46. 603,550 This figure is identical to that obtained by an earlier census of Israelite men over 20, taken during the 1st year in the wilderness (Exod. 30:12–16, 38:26). Another census taken in the 40th year netted a total of 601,730 (Num. 26:51). These figures presuppose a population of more than 2 million supporting itself for 40 years in the Sinai peninsula. The numbers are impossibly large. Some say that they reflect King David’s census (see 2 Sam. 24). Others suggest that “elef” here does not mean “1,000” but a military unit averaging 5 or 6 men. The number would then be “600 units [totaling] 3,550 men.”

DUTIES OF THE LEVITES (vv. 47–54)

This summary of the Levites’ encampment and guard duties for the sanctuary anticipates the details in chapters 3–4.

48. bad spoken Hebrew: va-y’dabber, usually “spoke.” But the order not to count the Levites must have been given before Moses took the census.

50. You Literally, “But you.” The Levites are assigned to the tabernacle instead of serving in the regular militia.

tend it By guarding it.
shall camp around the Tabernacle. 51When the Tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the Tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up; any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death. 52The Israelites shall encamp troop by troop, each man with his division and each under his standard. 53The Levites, however, shall camp around the Tabernacle of the Pact, that wrath may not strike the Israelite community; the Levites shall stand guard around the Tabernacle of the Pact.

54The Israelites did accordingly; just as the LORD had commanded Moses, so they did.

2

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: 2The Israelites shall camp each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral

51. take it down Dismantle it.
52. encamp troop by troop Many commentators note the details here of tribal encampments as a way of emphasizing the need for order and organization in achieving a spiritual life. Simḥah Zissel Ziv writes, “A person disorderly in behavior is also confused in thought, incapable of stable, consistent work.”
53. that wrath may not strike The Israelites are warned repeatedly that the awesome holiness of God can be destructive (see the story of Nadab and Abihu in Lev. 10:1–2; also Num. 3:10 and elsewhere). God is like a fire, capable of warming and comforting, but capable of burning as well.

CHAPTER 2

The key to the physical deployment of the Israelites as they camped and as they marched around the tabernacle, each under its chieftain. 2. standard Hebrew: *degel*; by extension, it refers to an army division or a tribal military unit. 2. each with his standard A person’s identity consists of three elements: the self [the standard], the family [the ancestral banners], and the community [the Tent of Meeting].
house; they shall camp around the Tent of Meeting at a distance.

3Camped on the front, or east side: the standard of the division of Judah, troop by troop. Chieftain of the Judites: Nahshon son of Amminadab. 4His troop, as enrolled: 74,600.

5Camping next to it:
The tribe of Issachar.
Chieftain of the Issacharites: Nethanel son of Zuar. 6His troop, as enrolled: 54,400.

7The tribe of Zebulun.
Chieftain of the Zebulunites: Eliab son of Helon. 8His troop, as enrolled: 57,400.

9The total enrolled in the division of Judah: 186,400, for all troops. These shall march first.

10On the south: the standard of the division of Reuben, troop by troop. Chieftain of the Reubenites: Elizur son of Shedeur. 11His troop, as enrolled: 46,500.

12Camping next to it:
The tribe of Simeon.
Chieftain of the Simeonites: Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai. 13His troop, as enrolled: 59,300.

14And the tribe of Gad.
Chieftain of the Gadites: Eliasaph son of Reuel. 15His troop, as enrolled: 45,650.

16The total enrolled in the division of Reuben: 151,450, for all troops. These shall march second.

at a distance It was necessary to make room for the levitical encampment, which was set up between the sanctuary and the Israelite camp.

3Nahshon His sister, Elisheba, was the wife of Aaron.

4His troop Literally, “As for his troop, its enrollment was.” The chieftain is always associated with his troop.
Then, midway between the divisions, the Tent of Meeting, the division of the Levites, shall move. As they camp, so they shall march, each in position, by their standards.

On the west: the standard of the division of Ephraim, troop by troop.
Chieftain of the Ephraimites: Elishama son of Ammihud. His troop, as enrolled: 40,500.

Next to it:
The tribe of Manasseh.
Chieftain of the Manassites: Gamaliel son of Pedahzur. His troop, as enrolled: 32,200.

And the tribe of Benjamin.
Chieftain of the Benjaminites: Abidan son of Gideoni. His troop, as enrolled: 35,400.

The total enrolled in the division of Ephraim: 108,100 for all troops. These shall march third.

On the north: the standard of the division of Dan, troop by troop.

Camping next to it:
The tribe of Asher.
Chieftain of the Asherites: Pagiel son of Ochran. His troop, as enrolled: 41,500.

And the tribe of Naphtali.
Chieftain of the Naphtalites: Ahira son of another.

17. midway between That is, in the midst of (see 10:17). The tabernacle and its levitical guards were divided into two groups during the march. The dismantled structure was transported by the Gershonites and Merarites who marched between the first and second divisions, whereas everything else was carried by the Kohathites in the very center of the column, between the second and third divisions.

18. As they camp, so shall they march The verse is interpreted homiletically to teach that one should be the same person at home as away from home, in private as in public.
Enan. 30 His troop, as enrolled: 53,400.

31 The total enrolled in the division of Dan: 157,600. These shall march last, by their standards.

32 Those are the enrollments of the Israelites by ancestral houses. The total enrolled in the divisions, for all troops: 603,550. 33 The Levites, however, were not recorded among the Israelites, as the Lord had commanded Moses.

34 The Israelites did accordingly; just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so they camped by their standards, and so they marched, each with his clan according to his ancestral house.

35 This is the line of Aaron and Moses at the time that the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. 2 These were the names of Aaron’s sons: Nadab, the first-born, and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar; 3 those were the names of Aaron’s sons, the anointed priests who were ordained for priesthood. 4 But Nadab and Abihu died by the will of the Lord, in God’s presence.” (i.e., within the sanctuary)

CHAPTER 3

4. Nadab and Abihu died by the will of the Lord They died, literally, “before the Lord, in God’s presence” [Sorotzkin].
will of the Lord, when they offered alien fire before the Lord in the wilderness of Sinai; and they left no sons. So it was Eleazar and Ithamar who served as priests in the lifetime of their father Aaron.

5 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 6 Advance the tribe of Levi and place them in attendance upon Aaron the priest to serve him. 7 They shall perform duties for him and for the whole community before the Tent of Meeting, doing the work of the Tabernacle. 8 They shall take charge of all the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting—a duty on behalf of the Israelites—doing the work of the Tabernacle. 9 You shall assign the Levites to Aaron and to his sons: they are formally assigned to him from among the Israelites. 10 You shall make Aaron and his sons responsible for observing their priestly duties; and any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death.

11 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 12 I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites in place of all the first-born, the first issue of the

SUBORDINATION OF THE LEVITES (vv. 5–13)

7–8. Guard duty was incumbent on the Levites when the camp was at rest (v. 7) and in transit (v. 8). Guard duty constituted half of their work; their labors of removal, the other half.

duties The term mishmeret, in connection with the tabernacle, means “guard duty.” The levitical cordon around the tabernacle guards it from incursion by the ordinary Israelite and protects the people from suffering what would be the consequent wrath of God.

and for the whole community By replacing the first-born, as commanded in verses 11–13.

before the Tent of Meeting The Levites guarded outside the sacred area, whereas the priests were stationed within.

8. The Levites guarded the “furnishings of the Tent” while transporting them during the march but had no access to them when they were set up in camp, where they were under the sole supervision of the priests.

on behalf of the Israelites By replacing their firstborn (see vv. 11–13).

doing Rather, “in doing” or “in addition to doing” or “while doing.” This phrase is also in verse 7 (about levitical guard duty when the camp was at rest); it may be a mistaken repetition by the copyist, a dittography.

assigned The root ßû implies dedication. By replacing the firstborn, the Levites are dedicated to the Lord.

oberving their priestly duties That is, guarding their priesthood against encroachment.

12. first issue of the womb Replacement of the firstborn by the Levites indicates that the former once held some kind of sacred status. It was the firstborn of the mother who held that status,
sialas several times after it occurs (e.g., Lev. 16:1; Num. 26:61), as if to hint that God too was having difficulty accepting their tragic death.

12. I hereby take the Levites Just as the first fruits of the harvest belong to God, both
womb among the Israelites: the Levites shall be Mine. 13 For every first-born is Mine: at the time that I smote every first-born in the land of Egypt, I consecrated every first-born in Israel, man and beast, to Myself, to be Mine, the Lord’s.

The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, saying: 14 Record the Levites by ancestral house and by clan; record every male among them from the age of one month up. 15 So Moses recorded them at the command of the Lord, as he was bidden. 16 These were the sons of Levi by name: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. 17 These were the names of the sons of Gershon by clan: Libni and Shimei. 18 The sons of Kohath by clan: Amram and Izhar, Hebron and Uzziel. 19 The sons of Merari by clan: Mahli and Mushi.

These were the clans of the Levites within their ancestral houses:

21 To Gershon belonged the clan of the Libnites and the clan of the Shimeites; those were the clans of the Gershonites. 22 The recorded entries of all their males from the age of one month up, as recorded, came to 7,500. 23 The clans of the Gershonites were to camp wherever the three levitical clans camped (south, west, and north, respectively), they presumably performed their guard duty for the tabernacle.

as a gesture of gratitude and as an expression of confidence that more fruit will be coming, the firstborn child “belongs to God.”

15. from the age of one month The census of Levites begins at the age of one month, the age at which redemption of the firstborn is required.

16. at the command of Rather: according to the oracle of. The two censuses of Levites in chapters 3 and 4, in contrast to the Israelite census in chapter 1, are taken by God. Moses is merely to record the totals and the work assignments.

23. camp Wherever the three levitical clans camped (south, west, and north, respectively), they presumably performed their guard duty for the tabernacle.

### HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH

3:13. For every first-born is Mine The ceremony of redeeming a firstborn son (Pidyon ha-Ben) is based on the Torah’s assertion here that all firstborn belong to God (see Exod. 13:2) but should be redeemed because the Levites serve in their place. See Comment on Num. 18:15. It is through this ceremony of grateful acknowledgement that parents can claim the child for themselves.
hind the Tabernacle, to the west. 24 The chieftain of the ancestral house of the Gershonites was Eliasaph son of Lael. 25 The duties of the Gershonites in the Tent of Meeting comprised: the Tabernacle, the tent, its covering, and the screen for the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; the hangings of the enclosure, the screen for the entrance of the enclosure which surrounds the Tabernacle, the cords thereof, and the altar—all the service connected with these.

27 To Kohath belonged the clan of the Amramites, the clan of the Izharites, the clan of the Hebronites, and the clan of the Uzzielites; those were the clans of the Kohathites. 28 All the listed males from the age of one month up came to 8,600, attending to the duties of the sanctuary. 29 The clans of the Kohathites were to camp along the south side of the Tabernacle. 30 The chieftain of the ancestral house of the Kohathite clans was Elizaphan son of Uzziel. 31 Their duties comprised: the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, and the sacred utensils that were used with them, and the screen—all the service connected with these. 32 The head chieftain of the Levites

24. ancestral house  Here, the larger unit of the clans making up the Gershonites, Kohathites, and Merarites.

25. duties  That is, guard duty. The tabernacle furnishings placed in the custody of the Gershonites and Merarites are clearly delineated. The former are to guard the fabrics; the latter, the planks and posts.

Tabernacle  The innermost tent covering composed of 10 finely twisted linen and woolen cloths with a design of cherubim worked into them.

tent  A second covering made up of 11 cloths of goat’s hair.

its covering  The outermost covering made of tanned ram skins and yellow-orange skins.

screen  The entrance to the tent was of lesser sanctity than the inner curtains, because the screen could be seen by anyone in the tabernacle court, whereas the inner curtains could not be seen from the outside.

27. Amramites  To which the descendants of Moses would belong.

28. attending to the duties of the sanctuary  It was the responsibility of the Kohathites to transport and to guard the most sacred objects, as itemized in verse 31.

29. south side  Starting with the east, which is the most prestigious position (see v. 38), the position next in importance, rotating to the right (clockwise), is the south. The Kohathites merited this because it was their honored task to carry the most sacred objects. Note the proximity of Kohath to the tribe of Reuben (see 2:10), which possibly accounts for their collaboration in chapter 16.

32. Although Eleazar was chief officer, he was given a great deal of physical labor (4:16). “There is no special privilege in the palace of the king” (JT Shab. 10:3); there is no room for an “honorary” position in the service of God.
was Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, in charge of those attending to the duties of the sanctuary.

33 To Merari belonged the clan of the Mahlites and the clan of the Mushites; those were the clans of Merari. 34 The recorded entries of all their males from the age of one month up came to 6,200. 35 The chieftain of the ancestral house of the clans of Merari was Zuriel son of Abihail. They were to camp along the north side of the Tabernacle. 36 The assigned duties of the Merarites comprised: the planks of the Tabernacle, its bars, posts, and sockets, and all its furnishings—all the service connected with these; 37 also the posts around the enclosure and their sockets, pegs, and cords.

38 Those who were to camp before the Tabernacle, in front—before the Tent of Meeting, on the east—were Moses and Aaron and his sons, attending to the duties of the sanctuary, as a duty on behalf of the Israelites; and any outsider who encroached was to be put to death.

39 All the Levites who were recorded, whom at the Lord’s command Moses and Aaron recorded by their clans, all the males from the age of one month up, came to 22,000.

40 The Lord said to Moses: Record every first-born male of the Israelite people from the age of one month up, and make a list of their names; 41 and take the Levites for Me, the Lord, in place of every first-born among the Israelite

32. attending to the duties That is, performing the guard duty.

38. to camp Because the priests had no watch posts outside the sacred area, their encampment in the east was also the place of their watch. This is to be expected, for the entrance to the tabernacle was in the east, which made that zone most vulnerable to encroachment.

on behalf of the Israelites By replacing their firstborn.

REPLACING THE ISRAELITE FIRSTBORN (vv. 40–51)

The number of Israelite firstborn exceeds that of the Levites by 273. The latter, chosen by lot, are redeemed by the payment of 5 shekels per person to the priests. This procedure became the standard for the redemption of all Israelite firstborn.

40. one month up An infant younger than 30 days was not considered a viable person, presumably because of the high rate of infant mortality.

39. The Levites were by far the smallest of the tribes. This was fitting, because they owned no large tracts of land and had to be supported by the gifts and tithes of their fellow Israelites. Their small numbers reduced the burden of support imposed on their neighbors.
people, and the cattle of the Levites in place of every first-born among the cattle of the Israelites. 42So Moses recorded all the first-born among the Israelites, as the Lord had commanded him. 43All the first-born males as listed by name, recorded from the age of one month up, came to 22,273.

44The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 45Take the Levites in place of all the first-born among the Israelite people, and the cattle of the Levites in place of their cattle; and the Levites shall be Mine, the Lord’s. 46And as the redemption price of the 273 Israelite first-born over and above the number of the Levites, 47take five shekels per head—take this by the sanctuary weight, twenty gerahs to the shekel—and give the money to Aaron and his sons as the redemption price for those who are in excess. 49So Moses took the redemption money from those over and above the ones redeemed by the Levites; 50he took the money from the first-born of the Israelites, 1,365 sanctuary shekels. 51And Moses gave the redemption money to Aaron and his sons at the Lord’s bidding, as the Lord had commanded Moses.

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:

2Take a [separate] census of the Kohathites among the Levites, by the clans of their ancestral house, 3from the age of thirty years up to the

41. every first-born among the cattle of the Israelites The firstborn of pure animals automatically belonged to the Lord. They must be sacrificed on the altar and may not be redeemed (according to Lev. 27:26 and Num. 18:15,17). Therefore the Sages concluded that any Israelite animal that was redeemed must have been impure, ineligible for the altar (BT Bek. 4b).

45. their cattle That is, the cattle of the Israeliite firstborn. Just as the firstborn Israelites must be redeemed, so must their cattle. The cattle of the Levites release the animals of the firstborn from their sacred status.

47. shekel See Comment to Gen. 23:9.

by the sanctuary weight See Comment to Exod. 30:13.
A second census of the Levites between the ages of 30 and 50 is taken to determine the size of the work force necessary to transport the sanctuary during the wilderness march.

**REMOVAL DUTIES OF THE KOHATHITES**

(vv. 1–20)

The Kohathites are listed first, even though Kohath is not the firstborn, because the work of the Kohathites involved greater responsibility: They transported the most sacred objects, and their work was more hazardous because they risked their lives (see vv. 15–20).

4. The specific job of the Kohathites is the porterage of the most sacred objects by shoulder. Only the priests, who were sacred, were qualified to handle the Ark and the other sacred objects. The Kohathites had no sacred status; hence their touching and even seeing the uncovered objects could be fatal. Thus Aaron and his sons had to cover the objects before the Kohathites could enter the sacred area to attend to their transport.

5. **screening curtain** It separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the sanctuary.

Ark The most sacred of the objects is covered first.

6. **cloth** Hebrew: **beged**; literally, “garment.” In the Hebrew Bible, “beged” usually covers only human beings, yet here all the sacred objects are initially covered by a beged. They are treated with the same respect as human beings. Indeed, they are treated like royalty—dressed in regal garb of violet or purple.

7. **put its poles in place** The Ark, the display table, and the altars were fitted with rings into which poles were inserted for carrying, whereas the lampstand, some utensils, and probably the laver were set into carrying frames.

8. **table of display** The full term is the “table of display bread”; every Shabbat, 12 loaves of bread arranged in two rows were displayed on it before God in the sanctuary.

**regular bread** The 12 loaves of bread regularly changed every Shabbat.

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**THE SECOND CENSUS OF LEVITES (4:1–49)**

A second census of the Levites between the ages of 30 and 50 is taken to determine the size of the work force necessary to transport the sanctuary during the wilderness march.

At the breaking of camp, Aaron and his sons shall go in and take down the screening curtain and cover the Ark of the Pact with it. They shall lay a covering of dolphin skin over it and spread a cloth of pure blue on top; and they shall put its poles in place.

5. **screening curtain** It separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the sanctuary.

**Ark** The most sacred of the objects is covered first.

6. **cloth** Hebrew: **beged**; literally, “garment.” In the Hebrew Bible, “beged” usually covers only human beings, yet here all the sacred objects are initially covered by a beged. They are treated with the same respect as human beings. Indeed, they are treated like royalty—dressed in regal garb of violet or purple.

7. **put its poles in place** The Ark, the display table, and the altars were fitted with rings into which poles were inserted for carrying, whereas the lampstand, some utensils, and probably the laver were set into carrying frames.

8. **table of display** The full term is the “table of display bread”; every Shabbat, 12 loaves of bread arranged in two rows were displayed on it before God in the sanctuary.

**regular bread** The 12 loaves of bread regularly changed every Shabbat.

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**CHAPTER 4**

3. A Levite male, in the prime of his life, during the years from 30 to 50, would be given responsibility for the arduous tasks of maintaining the tabernacle (and later the Temple). After age 50, his new tasks would require more wisdom and less physical strength: singing the Psalms, opening and closing the gates, and acting as mentor to younger Levites.
Then they shall take a blue cloth and cover the lampstand for lighting, with its lamps, its tongs, and its fire pans, as well as all the oil vessels that are used in its service. They shall put it and all its furnishings into a covering of dolphin skin, which they shall then place on a carrying frame.

Next they shall spread a blue cloth over the altar of gold and cover it with a covering of dolphin skin; and they shall put its poles in place. They shall take all the service vessels with which the service in the sanctuary is performed, put them into a blue cloth and cover them with a covering of dolphin skin, which they shall then place on a carrying frame. They shall remove the ashes from the [copper] altar and spread a purple cloth over it. Upon it they shall place all the vessels that are used in its service: the fire pans, the flesh hooks, the scrapers, and the basins—all the vessels of the altar—and over it they shall spread a covering of dolphin skin; and they shall put its poles in place.

When Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sacred objects and all the furnishings of the sacred objects at the breaking of camp, only then shall the Kohathites come and lift them, so that they do not come in contact with the sacred objects and die. These things in

**9. lampstand** Hebrew: m’norah; see Exod. 25:31–40.

**lamps** The lamps and the lampstand are separate objects.

**fire pans** For removing the ashes from the lamps.

**10. carrying frame** The m’norah and its utensils, which could not be suspended on poles like the Ark and table, required the construction of a special carrying frame.

**11. altar of gold** Also known as the altar of incense, it was carried on poles.

**12. service vessels** Whatever additional vessels are used inside the tent, especially with the incense altar, which is too small to hold any utensils.

**13. altar** The text turns to the bronze sacrificial altar of the courtyard, because all the sacred objects inside the sanctuary have been covered.

**purple cloth** Actually, red-purple. In distinction to the objects of the sanctuary whose covering was made of violet or blue-purple, the outer altar was wrapped in red-purple, a mark of the decreasing degree of holiness in moving from the shrine out into the courtyard.

**15. Aaron and his sons have finished** This concludes the priestly assignment that began in verse 5 with “Aaron and his sons shall go in.”

**come** That is, go in.

**contact . . . and die** The Kohathites’ contact with the covered objects can be as fatal as seeing them uncovered. Their removal labor is appropriately termed “skilled labor” (v. 3).
the Tent of Meeting shall be the porterage of the Kohathites.

16Responsibility shall rest with Eleazar son of Aaron the priest for the lighting oil, the aromatic incense, the regular grain offering, and the anointing oil—responsibility for the whole Tabernacle and for everything consecrated that is in it or in its vessels.

17The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: 18Do not let the group of Kohathite clans be cut off from the Levites. 19Do this with them, that they may live and not die when they approach the most sacred objects: let Aaron and his sons go in and assign each of them to his duties and to his porterage. 20But let not [the Kohathites] go inside and witness the dismantling of the sanctuary, lest they die.

porterage The dismantling and reassembling of the sacred objects is performed by the priests; the Kohathites are responsible only as porters.

16. Eleazar the priest, who personally is in charge of the sacred ingredients used with the objects carried by the Kohathites, must scrupulously supervise their porterage by reliable Kohathites. In addition, he supervises the Gershonite and Merarite clans, as well as his own clan, and is the chief of the Levites' labor battalions.

regular grain offering This probably refers to the private daily offering of the anointed priest.

18. cutoff The penalty of being “cut off” (karet) is inflicted only by God. Because the Kohathites face divine wrath for any mishap with the sacred objects, this term is quite appropriate here.

from the Levites Only the Kohathites, who carry the sacred objects, are in mortal danger, not the Gershonites or Merarites.

19. approach Literally, “have access, handle,” implying direct contact. Except for the Ark, there is no prohibition against approaching the sacred objects, only against encroaching on them.

to his duties and to his porterage Better: “to his porterage work.” The Kohathites have no duties in the sanctuary removal except the transport of sacred objects.

20. inside Into the tent.

witness the dismantling of the sanctuary Literally, “look at the sacred objects even for a moment.” Even the chance viewing of exposed objects inside the sanctuary could prove fatal.

20. There were special restrictions on the Levites who would handle the most sacred articles. Abravanel understood this verse to express concern lest the clans of Kohath become so fascinated by staring at the sacred objects that they would fall into a mystic trance, unable to do their work. Hirsch offers an opposite view; for him, the Torah’s concern is that the Kohathites might become too accustomed to the routine of seeing the sacred objects packed and unpacked: “lest they die” spiritually, losing their capacity to see the tabernacle as holy.
Hosea (8th century B.C.E.) was the first prophet to portray the covenantal bond between God and the people Israel in terms of a marriage. In chapter 1, before the opening of this haftarah, Hosea is bidden to marry a “wife of whoredom” who will bear “children of whoredom” with her many lovers. These acts symbolize the apostasy of the people Israel, turning away from God and pursuing other gods.

God now calls on Hosea and his fellow northern Israelites to rebuke their “mother” (the embodiment of the nation) who has gone astray after false lovers (i.e., gods), producing children conceived shamelessly through acts of promiscuity (i.e., apostasy).

Apostasy will not go unpunished, yet hope for the people Israel’s future is proclaimed from the outset, a sign that divine mercy transcends judgment for sin. The covenant, perverted by national sin, will be renewed for the straying people.

The prophet marks these shifts of attitude with symbolic changes of names. The shifts of status are underscored by the negative particle lo (not) and by its absence. Thus the rejected people called “Not-My-People” (lo ammi, 2:1, also 1:9) and “Not-accepted” (lo ruhamah, 1:6) will in the end be called “My People” (ammi). Removal of lo is the symbolic removal of distance between the nation and its God. Renewal of the covenant does not depend on Israel’s repentance or initiative. It is a transformation initiated and guided by God; through His commitment to justice, mercy, and faithfulness, the nation will be devoted to the Lord (2:21–22). God’s moral attributes stand at the center of the covenant.

Hosea’s perception of the covenant, grounded in the sanctity of love and marriage, led to the Sages’ understanding the Song of Songs as a dialogue of spiritual love between God and Israel. The Midrash underscored this theme and gave permanent status to Hosea’s bold motif.

Covenant renewal is the climax of the haftarah, culminating the divine longing for reconciliation through entreaty and patient love. Through the divine attributes of justice, righteousness, and mercy—which make up the essence of the Covenant and covenantal living—Israel is promised knowledge of the Lord, overcoming the forgetfulness and unknowing that has characterized its recent behavior (2:10,15). Hosea implores the nation to transcend the seductions of nature and recognize God as the one and only source of life (2:10). Speaking for God, Hosea regards this new religious consciousness as an essential transformation, the prerequisite for any covenant renewed in faithfulness and truth.

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

The parashah inaugurates the period of wandering in the wilderness with a census of the Israelite nation. Their wandering with the Ark of the Covenant, following their apostasy with the Golden Calf, could be perceived as a time of purification and regeneration before entry into the Promised Land (see Maimonides, Guide III:24).

The wilderness serves a similar function in the haftarah. Hosea details how the seductions of idolatry once again perverted Israel’s worship, corrupting their religious consciousness. Transformation will come about only through God’s coaxing and tender speech to the people in the “wilderness,” a symbolic image for the destroyed land (Ibn Ezra). This healing will inaugurate a period in which the rejected nation is restored in its homeland, regenerated beyond all measure or counting (Hos. 2:1). It will be a time of unification of the entire nation under one “head” (rosh, 2:2), a glorious transformation of the ancient past when each tribe was accounted for by its own head man (rosh) in the wilderness (Num. 1:4).
The wilderness is also a symbolic realm marking a spiritual journey of birth and rebirth. Later generations, reading Hosea 2:1–22 in association with the parashah, readily imagined the original wandering as a prototype for all generations conscious of their religious failures and of their need for covenantal renewal.

The number of the people of Israel shall be like that of the sands of the sea, which cannot be measured or counted; and instead of being told, “You are Not-My-People,” they shall be called Children-of-the-Living-God. 2The people of Judah and the people of Israel shall assemble together and appoint one head over them; and they shall rise from the ground—for marvelous shall be the day of Jezreel!

3Oh, call your brothers “My People,” And your sisters “Lovingly Accepted!”

4Rebuke your mother, rebuke her— For she is not My wife And I am not her husband— And let her put away her harlotry from her face And her adultery from between her breasts.

5Else will I strip her naked And leave her as on the day she was born: And I will make her like a wilderness, Render her like desert land, And let her die of thirst.

6I will also disown her children; For they are now a harlot’s brood,

This image recalls God’s promise of numerous descendants to Abraham (Gen. 15:5). The sharp contrast of this promise with the verse preceding the haftarah (“you are not My people, and I will not be your [God]”) anticipates divine mercy and restoration.

The image seems to point to rejuvenation of the national condition, particularly through a rise in population (see Exod. 1:10).

God urges the Israelites (i.e., the children) to rebuke their mother Israel for her spiritual harlotry (Radak).

Hosea uses legal and covenantal formulas to dramatize the divine-human relationship. Here, the wife’s guilt is emphasized by this divorce formula. Likewise, in Hos. 1:9, a repudiation formula (“I will not be your [God]”) reverses the opening of the Decalogue (“I the Lord am your God,” Exod. 20:2) and positive covenantal asser-
In that their mother has played the harlot,
She that conceived them has acted shamelessly—
Because she thought,
“I will go after my lovers,
Who supply my bread and my water,
My wool and my linen,
My oil and my drink.”

Assuredly,
I will hedge up her roads with thorns
And raise walls against her,
And she shall not find her paths.
Pursue her lovers as she will,
She shall not overtake them;
And seek them as she may,
She shall never find them.
Then she will say,
“I will go and return
To my first husband,
For then I fared better than now.”

And she did not consider this:
It was I who bestowed on her
The new grain and wine and oil;
I who lavished silver on her
And gold—which they used for Baal.

Assuredly,
I will take back My new grain in its time
And My new wine in its season,
And I will snatch away My wool and My linen
That serve to cover her nakedness.

7. The mother’s own thoughts (or words) are cited as self-incriminating evidence and proof of infidelity.

9. seek them . . . never find them Hosea uses the verbs “seek” and “find” to stress the failure of pursuing false gods. Elsewhere this pattern is used in positive terms, emphasizing God’s readiness to respond to Israelite repentance or supplication (see Deut. 4:29: “you will find Him, if only you seek Him with all your heart”).

10. gold—which they used for Baal Israel misuses the bounty of God for idolatrous rites.

11–12. The punishment of stripping and
12Now will I uncover her shame
In the very sight of her lovers,
And none shall save her from Me.
13And I will end all her rejoicing:
Her festivals, new moons, and sabbaths—
All her festive seasons.
14I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees,
Which she thinks are a fee
She received from her lovers;
I will turn them into brushwood,
And beasts of the field shall devour them.
15Thus will I punish her
For the days of the Baalim,
On which she brought them offerings;
When, decked with earrings and jewels,
She would go after her lovers,
Forgetting Me
—declares the Lord.

16Assuredly,
I will speak coaxingly to her
And lead her through the wilderness
And speak to her tenderly.
17I will give her her vineyards from there,
And the Valley of Achor as a plowland of hope.
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
When she came up from the land of Egypt.

shaming is a featured motif elsewhere as well (Ezek. 16:36–39). These elements may have been part of common law or practice in ancient Israel.

14. fee Hebrew: *etnān*, a harlot’s fee, like the *etnan* paid to a harlot in Hos. 9:1 and Deut. 23:19. The word puns on the payment itself (*t’enatah*, “her fig trees”). It also alludes to sexual passion (*ta•anatah*, Jer. 2:24).

15. days of the Baalim The plural “Baalim,” here and in verse 19, presumably is used to correspond to the many “lovers” (see 2:7,9,12,14). Baal was the Canaanite god of the storm and of vegetation.

16. through the wilderness Or, “into the desert”; a metaphor for the exile (Rashi, Radak, Eliezer of Beaugency) or for the devastated homeland (Ibn Ezra) where God will comfort the nation and begin the process of renewal. Alternatively, it is a figure for God’s revelation (cf. Hos. 13:5) and the place where Israel demonstrated its faithfulness to God (Jer. 2:2).

17. her vineyards Restored vineyards are a counterpoint to the destruction of vines in verse 14 (Ibn Ezra, Radak). Similarly, the covenant with the beasts of the field (v. 20) constitutes a counterpoint to their former destructive rapacity (v. 14).

Valley of Achor This may refer to the scene of Achan’s sin at the beginning of the conquest of the Promised Land (Josh. 7:24–26; Radak).
And in that day—declares the Lord—
You will call [Me] Ishi,
And no more will you call Me Baali.
For I will remove the names of the Baalim from her mouth,
And they shall nevermore be mentioned by name.

In that day, I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; I will also banish bow, sword, and war from the land. Thus I will let them lie down in safety.

And I will espouse you forever:
I will espouse you with righteousness and justice,
And with goodness and mercy,
And I will espouse you with faithfulness;
Then you shall be devoted to the Lord.

That ancient site of infidelity will now become a gateway of renewal.

18. Ishi The term for “my husband,” used figuratively for God in verse 9 and as part of the divorce formula in verse 4. Here it is a counterpoint to the term “Baali” (my Baal). The latter designation for a husband evokes the Canaanite god of that name, with whom the people sinned; hence that term will be avoided.

19. Unilaterally God will produce a religious transformation, not only by removing pagan terms from the nation’s mouth, but also through words of loving-kindness (v. 16) and gifts of espousal (vv. 21–22). No human act of repentance is indicated.

21–22. God promises an everlasting, unalterable commitment. This act of espousal includes gifts by God as the bride-price. These gifts, the central terms of covenantal fidelity and social ethics, are the means by which the people shall renew their relationship with God (cf. Jer. 9:23).

This espousal formula is recited by faithful Jews daily, while binding the strap of the hand t'fillin around the fingers of one hand. Thus they pledge to show their commitment to God through the covenantal behavior of justice and loving-kindness. It is the human response to God’s spiritual initiative as proclaimed in the haftarah.

be devoted The Hebrew v'yada•at (literally, “know”) echoes Near Eastern treaty terminology.