What Bamidbar Teaches Us About Living Between Worlds

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You have probably felt it on Motzei Shabbos, in the minutes after *havdalah*. Shabbos just ended, and already the phone is lighting up with everything you missed. You are not quite in one world and not quite in the other, and you have been told your whole life that this friction is temporary, that eventually you will figure out how to reconcile a graduate seminar on Tuesday with a Gemara *shiur* on Wednesday. But what if, as we will explore, that friction never resolves because it was never supposed to?

The book of Bamidbar, which we begin reading this week, opens with a strange staging decision. The Torah could have picked up the story anywhere, but it plants the entire narrative in the *midbar*, the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. The Israelites have left one world behind and have not yet arrived at the next. They are, in every sense, in between, and the Torah treats that position as something other than a detour. The wilderness is not a regrettable layover or a problem to be solved. The Torah dedicates an entire book to this in-between space because formation happens here, in the unsettled and the unfinished. For the modern Jew who walked out of day school and into a world it never prepared them for, who navigates the distance between diaspora comfort and covenantal demand, Bamidbar suggests that the space between worlds is precisely where identity takes root.

1. Why the Torah Opens in the Wilderness

The opening verse drops us into geography that doubles as theology: “God spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai” (Bamidbar 1:1). The verse could simply have said God spoke to Moshe. Instead, the text insists on naming the location, as though the wilderness itself matters to the message.

The Sages noticed this insistence on location, and Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7 teaches that the Torah was given through three elements: fire, water, and wilderness. Just as fire, water, and wilderness belong to no one, the reasoning runs, Torah can only be received in a space that is *hefker*, ownerless. The midrash is making a claim about receptivity, that you cannot hear something genuinely new while convinced you already have the answers. The structures that usually organize your life—career ladders, social hierarchies, the familiar rhythms of settled existence—have to fall away before a different kind of listening becomes possible.

The midrash frames this as a theological claim about divine revelation. The anthropologist Victor Turner, from an entirely different direction, identified a parallel in human psychology. In his landmark work *The Ritual Process*, Turner described the liminal phase of rites of passage as the period when initiates are stripped of their previous social identities but have not yet been assigned new ones. They exist in a deliberately disorienting threshold state, and Turner argued that this disorientation is what actually produces transformation. Without it, the old structures simply reassert themselves, which is why the experience feels so recognizable when it surfaces in your own life. The semester abroad where nothing felt automatic, the Friday night dinner where someone who grew up in the community but drifted away sits at a Shabbos table and realizes they no longer know the songs, the stretch of time when your old certainties stopped working and new ones had not yet arrived, all carry the same disorientation Turner spent his career documenting.

Malka Simkovich traced the origins of Jewish diaspora identity back to the Second Temple period, arguing that the experience of living away from the geographic center of Jewish life became the crucible in which portable, text-centered Judaism was forged. Scattered communities built their religious life around study and prayer precisely because the Temple was no longer available to them. What this suggests about Bamidbar is that a people who learn to receive Torah in ownerless space are a people equipped to carry holiness anywhere.

But Simkovich's argument has an uncomfortable flip side. The wilderness was also the place where an entire generation died, where rebellions erupted, where people begged to go back to Egypt. The Torah does not pretend the in-between is comfortable, but it insists that the discomfort is formative, that something essential about Israel's identity could only be shaped in unsettled ground. For the modern Jew who feels the friction of living between secular and religious worlds, Bamidbar offers an unexpected reading of that experience. The friction is the wilderness doing its work, stripping away the assumption that spiritual formation requires settled ground. What this reframing suggests about the entire diaspora experience provokes a question the rest of the book will answer: What happens once the wilderness becomes your home?

2. Being Counted When You Feel Lost

After establishing the wilderness as the setting, the Torah immediately does something peculiar. God instructs Moshe to take a census: “Lift the head of the entire congregation of the children of Israel” (Bamidbar 1:2). The Hebrew phrase, *se’u et rosh*, carries unexpected weight. A census could use the verb “count” or “number,” but the Torah chooses language that means to elevate, to raise up. Something about this counting is supposed to make people feel taller.

Rashi picks up on this immediately. Commenting on the first verse, Rashi explains that God counts the Israelites “because they are dear to Him.” He counts them at every turning point—after the Exodus, after the golden calf, before the Tabernacle’s dedication—the way you might count precious objects repeatedly, each time confirming that every one is still present and still matters. The census, in Rashi’s reading, is an act of endearment rather than administration, affection expressed through the deliberate attention of counting each person individually.

But the census also reveals its limits. This count tallies males aged 20 and older who can serve in the army. Women, children, the elderly, and the Levites fall outside its scope. If the counting is an act of love, what does it mean for those left uncounted? The tradition offers partial answers, noting that the Levites receive their own census later in the parsha and that the half-shekel census of Shemot 30 includes everyone. The gap remains, though, and Rashi’s reading of divine affection applies to the act of counting itself while the question of who gets counted exposes the distance between the ideal and the implementation.

The tradition complicates the census further. Shmuel II 24 tells of King David ordering a census that brought plague upon Israel. The act of counting, in that context, became an act of reduction, treating people as units in an army rather than as individuals with names. The difference between God’s census and David’s census turns on what the counting is for. Are you counting people to use them, or counting them to see them?

The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott explored a parallel dynamic in *Playing and Reality*. Winnicott argued that children develop a stable sense of self only within what he called a “holding environment,” a space where they feel reliably seen by another person. Without that experience of being individually recognized, the self fragments. Adults in disorienting environments, new immigrants, people navigating career transitions, anyone living between cultures, need regular confirmation that they exist as particular, irreducible individuals.

Gary Gulman spoke about his own experience with severe depression and the way that his fear of anonymity, of disappearing into the undifferentiated mass, drove both his darkest periods and his comedy. The anonymity of depression mirrors the anonymity of displacement. When you feel lost in the wilderness between worlds, the act of someone lifting your head, saying your name, confirming that you count, is not a bureaucratic formality but a form of rescue. The Torah builds this rescue into the opening chapter of a book about wandering, as though to say that the first task in any wilderness is making sure nobody disappears. What the wilderness and the census together reveal is a pattern of deliberate disorientation followed by deliberate recognition, and that pairing raises a further question about how a community maintains its center of gravity when every landmark keeps shifting.

3. Carrying Your Center

The camp arrangement described in the second chapter reveals an organizing principle that changes everything. “The children of Israel shall camp, each man by his flag, with the signs of their fathers’ houses, they shall camp surrounding the Tent of Meeting” (Bamidbar 2:2). 12 tribes, four divisions, all oriented around a single point, the *Ohel Moed* (Tent of Meeting) where God’s presence dwelled. The wilderness had no fixed landmarks, no permanent roads, no city walls. The only fixed point was portable, and if you have ever moved to a new city and rebuilt your Shabbos table from scratch, you already understand the principle at work.

Ramban on Bamidbar 1:1 reads the entire book as the continuation of Sinai. The *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), in his understanding, became the new locus of divine communication, effectively replacing Mount Sinai. The revelation did not stay behind on the mountain. It folded itself into canvas and acacia wood and moved wherever the camp moved, the Israelites carrying divine presence through every encampment and every departure.

George Steiner, the literary critic, argued in his essay "Our Homeland, the Text" that Jewish survival across millennia of exile depended on precisely this kind of portability. Steiner writes as a secular intellectual, and his essay frames Jewish textual devotion through the lens of literary criticism rather than faith, treating Torah as cultural artifact rather than divine word. Ramban would have rejected the premise entirely. But Steiner's conclusion, that Jews made the text itself into a portable homeland, lands in the same place the tradition does, even if it arrives by a different road. Wherever a community gathered around Torah, that place became, in a functional sense, Sinai. Read alongside Ramban's insistence that the *Mishkan* carried the living presence of God from camp to camp, Steiner's secular observation takes on a dimension he likely did not intend.

Dr. Haym Soloveitchik described the rupture that modernity inflicted on this system. In his influential analysis, the shift from mimetic tradition to text-based authority represented a fundamental reconstruction of how Jews carried their center. When the lived, embodied community traditions that had transmitted Judaism for centuries were disrupted by immigration, urbanization, and secularization, Jews rebuilt their portable sanctuary from texts, from codified law, from explicit instruction rather than absorbed practice. The camp arrangement in Bamidbar is the original version of this adaptation. You can lose your geography and your neighbors and every external marker of belonging, but what you cannot lose is the center you carry, provided you organize your daily life around it deliberately.

In practice, the principle is already woven into your week. Shabbos turns any apartment into a sanctuary, and the daily structure of prayer and kashrut organizes the remaining six days around the same portable axis. But does framing observance this way overstate its power? The person who keeps Shabbos out of obligation rather than conviction, whose davening happens because the alarm went off rather than because something stirred, may not recognize their Friday night table as a sanctuary. Routine is both the portable center's greatest asset and its greatest threat, and the question for the diaspora Jew is never whether you have a center but whether you tend it with the same deliberation the Torah demands, because a center you stop organizing around eventually stops being a center at all. One tribe understood this better than any other, a people who inherited no land of their own and yet held the entire structure together.

4. The Levite Principle: Living on the Threshold

Among those who inherited no land, one tribe stands out for the radicalism of its assignment: “I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn” (Bamidbar 3:12). Originally, the firstborn of each family held the priestly role. After the golden calf, that responsibility transferred to an entire tribe set apart for sacred service. The Levites received no territorial inheritance in the Land of Israel. They lived among the other tribes, serving them, teaching them, maintaining the sacred infrastructure, but never fully belonging to the settled agricultural society around them.

Sforno on this verse reads the substitution concisely, as a form of redemption. But Rambam takes the underlying idea much further. In a passage that remains one of the most radical statements in all of halachic literature, Rambam writes that “any one of the inhabitants of the world” whose spirit moves them to set themselves apart for the service of God becomes “sanctified as holy of holies.” Rambam preserves the halachic categories of tribal identity while making a broader claim about spiritual aspiration, that the orientation of the Levite is available as a posture even to those born outside the tribe. The Levite identity becomes an existential choice available to anyone willing to live on the threshold between the sacred and the mundane.

This threshold identity has a modern sociological analogue. Ruth Useem coined the term “third culture kids” in her research on expatriate families, and decades later David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken developed the concept into a full study in *Third Culture Kids*. Their research documents how children raised between cultures develop a hybrid identity that belongs fully to neither their passport culture nor their host culture, leaving them perpetually on the threshold. The findings show that while this position creates real challenges, including a persistent sense of restlessness and difficulty with simple answers to the question “Where are you from?”, it also produces unusual adaptability, cultural fluency, and comfort with complexity.

Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz examined how Orthodox education must engage with questions of systemic inequality and social justice, an instance of the threshold work the Levite principle describes. When you bring the moral commitments of the broader world into conversation with your religious community, you are doing precisely the kind of boundary translation the Levites modeled, moving between two worlds rather than choosing one. But not everyone on this boundary chose to be there. The Modern Orthodox Jew who grew up observant in a secular society inherited this threshold identity. Nobody asked whether you wanted to straddle two worlds; the straddling was the condition of your upbringing. And the person who carries that unchosen responsibility may experience it as exhausting rather than meaningful. Bamidbar never pretends boundary life is easy, but the Levite model insists that the people who live on the boundary are the ones entrusted with maintaining the sacred center for everyone else, and that the burden they carry is inseparable from the trust.

5. The Burden Is the Blessing

That trust came with specific assignments the Torah catalogues in precise detail: “When Aharon and his sons have finished covering the sacred furnishings … only then shall the Kohathites come and carry them” (Bamidbar 4:15). Every Levite family received a particular role, curtains and poles and pins and sockets, the components of the portable sanctuary distributed across hundreds of shoulders for decades of travel through the desert. The Torah uses the Hebrew word *masa* (burden) for these assignments and offers no apology for the demand.

The Talmud transforms the meaning of this labor with a single image. Sotah 35a teaches that when the Levites carried the Ark of the Covenant, “the Ark carried its bearers in the air and crossed the Jordan.” The Talmud insists on the paradox as physical reality, not metaphor, the burden and the support occupying the same object, the same moment. The carrying was the *avodah* (sacred service), and the *avodah* sustained the people who performed it. This is the principle that runs beneath all of Bamidbar: that the obligations you carry through the wilderness are the same obligations that hold you together while you carry them.

Ayelet Fishbach spent years studying why humans fixate on destinations at the expense of the journey. In *Get It Done*, she demonstrates that we treat the process of getting somewhere as an obstacle to be endured rather than a source of meaning in itself. We discount the journey because we are wired to overvalue arrival. Fishbach's work suggests that reframing the process as inherently valuable changes both motivation and satisfaction. The Torah arrived at the same insight millennia earlier, cataloguing the burdens of the Levites with the same care it uses for the dimensions of the Ark and insisting that the carrying matters as much as the destination.

But telling someone their burden is actually a blessing can sound like a sophisticated way of telling them to stop complaining. Anyone who has ever juggled competing obligations that refuse to be reconciled—work against family, loyalty against self-preservation, the demands of one community against the norms of another—knows how that framing can land. The person carrying that load does not need to be told it is secretly a gift. David Bashevkin addressed this directly in speaking about his own mental health journey. Bashevkin described the daily effort of showing up to religious life while carrying depression and doubt, the mornings when davening feels mechanical and the evenings when learning feels hollow. His account resists the temptation to frame the struggle as a prelude to some triumphant resolution, because the insight from Bamidbar is that the carrying itself is the service. The Levites did not carry curtains and poles as a warm-up for arriving in Israel. The carrying was their *avodah* for 40 years.

And the implications reach into the most ordinary moments of your week. You juggle Shabbos dinner prep with Friday afternoon deadlines and explain to colleagues why you cannot attend the Saturday conference session. You sit in a secular classroom holding questions that your professor does not know exist. These are the *masa*, the sacred burden that, when carried faithfully, carries you in return. Bamidbar makes a single claim across five chapters. The wilderness counted you, the camp oriented you, and the threshold gave you a calling. The wilderness does not end when you arrive somewhere. It is where the work happens, and the space between worlds is your spiritual life.

Questions for Reflection

1. **Where in your daily routine do you feel caught between two worlds, and what would change if you understood that in-between space as formative rather than temporary?**
2. **When has carrying a burden—religious, professional, or personal—surprised you by sustaining you in ways you did not expect?**

3. **Where in your life do you function as a "Levite," maintaining a threshold between two worlds that others might not see?**

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