

## Torah Portion Preview for B'midbar

*Sabbath beginning May 12, 2023*

B'midbar (In the Wilderness) begins with God's demand of Moses to take a census of fighters, to arrange each tribe in spokes radiating inward toward the Tabernacle, and to specify their ways of engaging with the Tabernacle. The Levites, by far the smallest tribe numerically, were assigned the gravely important duties of caring for the tabernacle and its furnishings. They were the tribe placed closest to it. The other tribes fanned out from it in a sequence reminiscent of Jacob's praise or condemnation of his sons.

Commentators variously focused on the seemingly impossible numbers of fighters, the ordered hierarchy of tribes, and people excluded from the count. If we had counted deeds instead of fighting men, we would see that clans with disapproved deeds were kept at the periphery while the deeds of those closest to the core were even spelled out in detail. We grow from errant deeds far from God inward to precious deeds of caring for each other. Our tradition has preserved such caring practices beyond not just our lives but even the spans of our civilizations. The hub-and-spoke image is a vivid reminder to keep God at the core of our actions.