

*Parashat B'midbar* (Numbers 1:1-4:20)

*Parashat B'midbar* opens the fourth book of the Torah, also called *B'midbar* (in the wilderness). Rabbi Isaac Meir Rothenberg, founder of the Ger dynasty of chassidim, notes this *parashah* (portion) always falls just before Shavuot, which celebrates our receiving the Torah at Sinai. One reason the Torah is given in the wilderness is because only when you divest yourself of all vanity and preconceptions and become as barren as the wilderness are you ready to receive God's word (Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 55a).

In *B'midbar*, God speaks to Moses and tells him to prepare the Israelites for their wilderness trek by conducting a census of army-ready men: "*S'u et rosh* (raise the heads) of the entire congregation ..." (Num. 1:2). Now, the Israelites are former slaves, used to bowing their heads. They are destined to wander in the desert, which quickly humbles the strongest. And they are led by Moses, a great prophet. It would be very easy for the Israelites to look out into the vastness of the desert and conclude they're just not up to the task and pack it in. So the image of Moses raising the heads of the Israelites is striking.

Rabbi Abraham Twerski (1930-2021; American chassidic rabbi and psychiatrist specializing in substance abuse) claims Moses raises their heads so they don't confuse humility with a sense of inadequacy. Inadequacy means feeling there's no point in trying. Humility means feeling whatever you've already achieved is nothing compared to what is possible. Moses raises the Israelites' heads to remind them of their intrinsic value so when they look out at the desert, they will see uplifting potential and not overwhelming emptiness.

Gut Shabbos/Shabbat Shalom