PARASHAH #101
Torah: Numbers 4:21–5:10
Haftarah: Judes 13:2–25
Apostolic Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 12:12–18

INTRODUCTION
Our section this week consists of three main teachings. First, we will share some comments about the use of numbers in the Book of Numbers. This will be followed by a section concerning ritual purity. We will finish with Moshe's teaching about the practice of justice in the covenant community.

I. THE MATTER OF THE NUMBERS
An old rabbinic name for the Book of Numbers is *Chomesh HaPekudim* (חמש הפקודים), meaning, "the Book of Counting|" or "Numbering." When you began Numbers in the annual cycle, I am sure that you spoke about Moshe's use of numbers in this book. Here in our passage we have four more incidents where Moshe gives a number, resulting from counting the people. I do not intend to contradict what may have been said previously. I would just like to either confirm or add to the previous interpretation.

In **4:36** Moshe counts the men of the Kohat family. In **4:40** Moshe counts the men of the Gershon family, **4:44** is the number from the Merari family and **4:48** represents the total of men from the descendants of Levi who were "thirty years old and upward even to fifty years old, everyone who could enter the service for work in the tent of meeting."

For years scholars have attempted to understand these numbers. Many think that if we take them literally, the number would be unreasonably too high. I recently read Dennis Prager's take on this problem, and he presents several possible options of understanding the numbers very clearly.

Different Possible Options
Prager notes, like others, that according to a literal interpretation of the numbers in Numbers, the entire nation of Israel at this time amounted to "at least two million people, and likely far more."[1] Yet, he says that "it seems quite unlikely that more than two million Israelites were wondering in the desert."[2] He then presents several possible ways to understand these seemingly high numbers of people. "One solution to this problem may be that the Hebrew word which usually means 'thousand' *eleph*, had another meaning — 'group' or 'contingent'."[3] Another view is that the numbers are there to teach lessons and not necessarily to "convey arithmetic precision."[4] Furthermore, commentator Ronald Allen asserts, "It appears possible to me that the figures given in the two census lists for the army of Israel may be a magnification by a factor of ten. An army of about sixty thousand men would fit what we know of the criteria of the region and the armies."[5] Finally, let us not hesitate to take the numbers very literally!

The Book of Numbers leaves room for genuine spiritual and scholarly people to disagree on how to understand the large numbers in the book. We are not going to solve the problem here.

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1. Dennis Prager, *Numbers: God and Man in the Wilderness* (*The Rational Bible*), 9.
2. *Ibid*. 10.
3 *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 11.

II. The Matter of Being Tam'ei 5:1–4

This next section in Numbers is short, but difficult to understand. On the surface, it seems rather simple: people with certain secretions from the body were considered "unclean" or "impure" and must be sent outside of the camp of the Israelites, at least temporarily.

A. Oh, the Language Problems!

Most of us are born and raised in places separated by thousands of miles (kilometres), over three millennia, and different languages from the origin of these teachings. Sadly, our attempt to understand the Scriptures often amount to Mork's musings (remember the television series called "Mork and Mindy?"), about how strange life for him is here on planet earth.

The words in question are tahor and tam;ei, Most of the English translations of tahor and tam'ei reflect these huge differences. In fact, we are not too sure if I, the teacher, am going to be able to explain these terms as accurately as is necessary, either. However, try we must, with the understanding that as we grow, our comprehension of the Scriptures will also grow.

Tahor and tam'ei are most often rendered into English by the words "clean"" and "unclean" respectively. Sometimes other translations are made such as "pure" or "impure". In our opinion, other translations come closer by rendering these Hebrew words with the phrase "ritually clean" or "ritually unclean". These renderings get more to the heart of the issue than just saying, "clean" or "unclean" (or "contaminated").

One of the problems we face with these English words is that they seem to imply that there is something dirty or repulsive about a person who is in the status of being tam'ei ("unclean"). That certainly is not true. We need to avoid the picture of a scenario where, upon declaring a person "unclean", the priest covers his face with his arms and shouts with a loud voice "tam'ei! tam'ei"!, while mothers rush their children from the streets into their houses slamming and locking their doors behind them — as if the tam'ei person has been given a dreadful plague! Often, the rendering of these words as "clean" or "unclean" tends to leave us with that kind of picture in our minds.

B. The World of Sin and Death

Let us begin our exploration of the meaning of these difficult Hebrew words with the word *tam'ei* (טמא). Since we must have some kind of starting point in order to attempt to understand tam'ei, let us begin to work with the translation of "ritual prohibition". This would indicate to us that when a person was considered tam'ei, he was prohibited from participating in the Mishkan or Temple sacrificial system, the primary purpose of which was to bring one near to God. Hence, when one was in a state of tam'ei, he/she was in a state that prohibited them from outwardly drawing as near to God as they wanted. Why? Were they physically dirty? Were they poisoned?

One scholar made this important observation of tam'ei. He said, "Ritual uncleanness is often linked with the sphere of death."[6] It seems that this might be a key statement to help us to understand these complex Hebrew concepts. The vast majority of usages of these words occur when a person comes into contact with either sin or death. When a person came into contact with the realm of sin and death, he is taught through Torah that this realm is tam'ei. For example, when a person touched a dead body, he was declared tam'ei for one day. When a person touched blood or had some kind of bodily fluid flowing from him/her, he was called tam'ei. Likewise,

6. R. Laird Harris, ed. *The Theological Dictionary of Old Testament*, vol. V, 331.

when a person had a certain kind of skin affliction or lived in a house that had a particular kind of discoloration on the walls, he and it were rendered tam'ei.

What is the common denominator with all of these examples? It is sin and/or death. The dead body is clearly in that realm. Since the Bible declares that the life of a person is in the blood, then blood flowing from a body, pictures the life flowing out of it. That is, therefore, also entering into the *realm* of death. Thus, a tam'ei person was one who either walked in sin or came into contact with something which had to do with the *realm* of sin and death.

With the information we have so far, we can now formulate a working definition of tam'ei. Tam'ei is not primarily a physical condition. It is a *state* declared upon a person who has come into contact with the realm of sin and death, thereby hindering him physically drawing near to God. Sometimes there was a physical manifestation of this state; sometimes there was none. However, being declared tam'ei says little, if anything, about drawing near to God inwardly. It had to do with participation with the Mishkan and/or Temple.

Again, one aspect of this working definition must be clarified. When we read in the Torah of a person who was tam'ei, we need to keep in mind that it is not the essence of the person himself whom God is prohibiting from outwardly approaching Him. Instead, God is in the process of teaching His people a critical spiritual reality. This reality is that life does not mix with death; sin does not mix with righteousness; sacred does not mix with profane; and idolatry does not mix with the Almighty! In other words, the declaration of tam'ei or tahor is the way the Holy One teaches us the issues of life and death and sacred separations that protect God's sanctity. This is why, in most cases, the time period of being declared tam'ei is only one full day. Moreover, there is nothing prohibiting that person from inwardly coming as close to God as he/she wished. The declaration of tahor or tam'ei is designed by God to be a teaching tool, helping people to understand some deeper spiritual realities.

By declaring a person tam'ei, then, God was saying, in essence, "You are in a state where you have either sinned yourself or have come into contact with the realm of sin and death. Since I want people to know that My kingdom is totally different from the realm of sin and death, then I must prohibit you from coming into My House, the Mishkan, where you would be approaching My innermost chambers, the outward representation of My realm, the realm of life and righteousness. You, then act as an object lesson!"

This is pictured for us by the regulations which required a person to wait for a tahor declaration or to be immersed in water before he went into the Mishkan It was not that God was repulsed by the person. It was, rather, the Lord was teaching us through an important picture — the picture of tahor and tam'ei, with their resultant physical consequences. The lesson was this: just as there were only two statuses, tahor and tam'ei, in regard to coming into the Mishkan, so are there only two states in the universe, life or death. Either a person is living, or he is dead. Thus, something either has to do with life or with death! The two do not mix.

On an unseen level then, we see that God is life and sin is death. That which is of the realm of sin and death works "death" results. Since sin is the ultimate cause of death, the two are very closely related. That is why tam'ei comes when a person is either not living Torah or has come into contact with death.

C. Two Kingdoms

Let us take these ideas to even a deeper level. We would like to suggest that in the declaration of tahor or tam'ei, the Holy One was teaching Israel (and us), via a graphic object lesson, a basic teaching on the reality of life here on planet earth. He was teaching that there are only two

realms, two kingdoms. The one kingdom can be called the kingdom of this world, the kingdom of sin and death, the kingdom of darkness, Satan's kingdom, or the kingdom of Adam. They can be called by several different names, but they are all synonymous.

The second kingdom can be called the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Messiah. No matter how we refer to them, there are only two kingdoms. The two states, tahor and tam'ei picture these two kingdoms. In one kingdom, sin and death reign and in the other, grace, righteousness and life reign. It is important, however, to remember that *there is no third kingdom*, no middle ground. It is either black or white, although the kingdom of sin and death often tries to imitate God's kingdom. If we keep in mind that something is either tam'ei or tahor, it will help us to remember that even though something may *look* like God's kingdom, it is not — if it consists of sin and death!

Please note that when we state that there are two kingdoms, we do not mean that these two kingdoms have equal power. Indeed, there is nothing equal about them! There is no theological (or philosophical) dualism in this universe. There is only one God in this universe, and He is the absolute Sovereign. That other kingdom, Satan's kingdom (or whatever else we may call it), only *thinks* it is equal to God's kingdom. Moreover, that other kingdom would like to persuade us to believe through deception that it is equal to and even greater than God's kingdom. It is all a charade. However, that other kingdom does exist and possesses a large degree of power. God wants us to be aware that it exists, and it is vying for our allegiance. That is why we need to learn about it.

D. Two Kingdoms

What are the basic characteristics of Satan's kingdom? They are sin and death! Paul explains this in more detail in two key passages in the Apostolic Scriptures. The first passage is Romans 5:12–21. Here, Paul teaches, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin...Nevertheless death reigned..." (5:12–14). Note that he uses the word, "reigned", a word describing a kingdom. He does so again in 5:17 where he says, "death reigned". This then, is one kingdom, the kingdom that is characterized by sin and death.

The second kingdom is also described in this passage. 5:17 says, "For, if, by the trespass of the one man death reigned, … how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Messiah Yeshua." Here again Paul uses the word "reigned", showing that he is alluding to another kingdom. This second kingdom is the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is characterized by grace, righteousness, and life.

Paul summarizes his teaching on the two kingdoms by formulating a comparison between the two. He says, "so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Messiah Yeshua" (5:21).

Thus, two realms or kingdoms are spelled out in Romans 5. There is no middle ground mentioned in this passage, nor alluded to. From where did Paul get his understanding of two kingdoms? Of course, God revealed it to him, but was this a direct supernatural divine revelation, or did Paul have this understanding from his knowledge of the Torah? We are suggesting that the Lord in Torah first taught this whole concept when He introduced the concepts of tahor and tam'ei.

What a master teacher He is! God knows that we cannot handle all of His ideas all at once, so He patiently began to prepare us for the ideas of two kingdoms by first introducing the two states: tahor and tam'ei. Just like one can either be in one kingdom or the other, so also are the

two states of tahor and tam'ei. Moreover, the way to become tam'ei is to have some kind of contact with either sin or death (the two being so closely associated). Hence, tahor means that a person has contact with, or is walking within, the reign of the kingdom of God and tam'ei means that a person has had contact with, or is himself, walking within the confines of the kingdom of sin and death.

Summary

In summary, the Holy One indwelt His earthly house. That fact rendered the situation unique. How can such holiness dwell amidst such unholiness on earth? In God's unseen world, this is not a problem. God's heavenly House is protected and surrounded by sanctity. No one may go there except God. The situation is different for God's earthly sanctuary. Two factors usually rendered a person as tam'ei — disqualified from participating in God's earthly house. One was a human body condition that was imperfect and plagued by Things which signified that the person was in contact with the realm of death. One such example was a woman's monthly period. What should have resulted in producing another human life, instead resulted in a bloody discharge. The Torah says that the life of a person is in the blood. If there is bleeding from a person, especially during a woman's monthly cycle, that is a sign that what was intended for life, instead resulted in death.

Another example is when a person was in physical contact with a corpse. Even though the person was not necessarily the cause of the death, if one touched a dead body, that was sufficient contact with the realm of death to render that person to be excluded from God's sanctuary. "These three categories of affliction were seen as severe impurities, as is obvious from the fact that their purification is of seven-day duration and involves a complex ritual."[7]

Let us be clear, sometimes when a person entered into the status of being tam'ei it might have been caused by some sort of trespass or sin, yet, according to Numbers **5:1–4**, it was not always then result of sin. The causes of bring excluded include everyone with leprosy, everyone having a discharge, and everyone who is tam'ei because of contact with a dead person. All of these things are not trespasses or sins. It is all merely teaching that the Lord's consent to dwell in the Tabernacle must be matched by Israel's scrupulousness in keeping the camp pure. Implied is that any tam'ei in the camp threatens the sanctity of the Tabernacle. In Canaan the demand for purity is extended to all of God's Land (Numbers 35:34).

Where a person was sent to be outside the camp it does not mean that person lost this standing with God. Nor does it mean that situation was permanent. Where did they go? "There does not seem to have been a special place outside the community, they could live in any location that did not compromise the holiness of the camp."[8] It is said that after the Israelites were settled in the Promised Land, special houses were built outside the cities for the tam'ei people who were afflicted supernaturally by God, presumably for sin.

Before we leave this topic, we have some important remarks to share about the nature of leprosy. Gordon Wenham notes concerning **5:2**, "Despite the translation *leper* (RSV) or *malignant skin disease* (NEB), neither leprosy nor skin cancer is meant by the Hebrew term *ṣāraʿat*. Careful study of such passages as Leviticus 13 and Numbers 12:10–16 suggests that patchy, scaly skin diseases are meant, such as psoriasis or favus."[9] This is heading toward the

7. Jacob Milgram, *Numbers* (*JPS Torah Commentary*), 33.
8. R. K. Harrison, *Numbers* (*Wycliffe Exegetical Commentaries*), 119.
Ronald B. Allen, *Numbers* (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*), comments on Numbers 6:27, 119.
9. Gordon Wenham, *Numbers* (*Tyndale Commentaries*), 86.

nature of the Hebrew word leprosy, but we think that it still not quite convey what the text might be saying.

III. The Matter of Justice 5:5–10

This passage discusses a very important judicial matter. That is the thrust of **5:5–10.** It has to do with people who sin against each other. The Hebrew however is quite vague. It tells us that when a person sins he "is unfaithful to the Lord." Thus, a wrong against another was considered as if the wrong were against the Lord.

Then we are told that when a man or woman do any from all the sins of men that person is considered guilty. It then proceeds to explain the consequence. A natural question that can be asked is, "*Which* sins are being referred to?" Since one of the consequences is restitution, the scholars assume that the sins implied here are those that involve some sort of lying or theft. Thus, most commentators, both Jewish and evangelical, relate **5:5–10** to Leviticus 5:20–26 and 6:1–7. They assert that the passages in Leviticus and Numbers complement each other. Along these lines, the ArtScroll Chumash suggests an important hermeneutic principle for us. It says, "the Torah sometimes repeats a law in order to add something to it."[10] In this case, Numbers supplies several new features the Leviticus passages do not mention. These features have to do with the judicial process the offender must travel through in order for restoration to take place.

A. Regret

The first part of that process is described in the Torah as, "that person shall become guilty" (**5:6**). Some think that real admission of guilt has little or nothing to do with one's feelings; that it is just a formal statement of the wrong committed. They insist that a person does not need to "feel" guilty or remorse for his sin. Such thinking is based on the idea that feelings have very little place, if any, in our lives with God. However, we need to remember that God gave us feelings. When we are angry, we feel angry. When we are happy, we feel happy. Subsequently, did not God also give us feelings that express the sense of guilt?

Furthermore, let us examine a key word in our passage: *ashmah*, אשמה). It means "to be guilty." Hebrew students would be quick to notice that it is the verbal form of the noun, *asham* (אשם), the term which is used to describe the guilt offerings of Leviticus 5. Commentator Timothy Ashley may help us with the concept when he says,

> The insistence that the word "guilty" in this passage to mean only a state without the remorse behind it, is rather redundant. It seems hardly necessary to add, however, that the one who commits sin and trespasses against [Adonai] is, or becomes, guilty. It can hardly be conceived that such a person would be innocent. A different translation of the term is in order. J. Milgrom's research has given a new translation to all occurrences of the root. Here it means, "to feel guilty".[11]

Thus, the text seems to be saying that the first step along the way of restoration from a lie or theft against someone else in the holy community is remorse for that wrong.

B. Agreeing with God

The judicial process is more than a mere admission of guilt and the remorse of a repentant heart. The text also teaches us to confess that sin (**5:7**). Nechama Leibowitz, quoting the *Sefer Ha-hinukh* tells us that "the verbal confession of guilt provides an indication that the sinner truly believes that all his deeds are revealed and known to the Lord, blessed be He. Again, by verbally

10. *The ArtScroll Chumash*, 752.
11. Timothy Ashley, *Numbers* (NICOT), 113.

specifying the sin and regretting it, he will be more careful in the future not to stumble thereon."[12]

The Greek Scriptures provide a useful clarification of what confession is. Let us look at 1 John 1:9. It reads, **"**If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, so that He will forgive us our sins and [b]cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The Greek word translated "confess" is, *homolegomen* (ομολογωμεν). This Greek word means literally, "to say the same thing". Hence, confession of sin means to say the same thing about that sin as God does. The one who sins agrees with God that he wronged another person. He also agrees with God that when he wronged that other person, he ultimately offended God Himself. This is what Numbers **5:6** tells us. It says that when we sin against someone else, we are "unfaithful to the Lord". The word "unfaithful", *ma'ol* (מעל), could also be rendered "treacherous". The sin against the human was unfaithfulness to the Lord. Samson Raphael Hirsch elaborates on this by comparing man's sin to a debt that he owes both to the one against whom he sins, and to the Holy One against whom he also transgresses. He says, "HaShem is the invisible third party Who is present at all transactions of His creatures. He is the guarantor of human relations. When the debtor denies his debt, he utters HaShem's Name in a false oath."[13]

Furthermore, Jacob Milgrom offers this helpful note: "The Septuagint correctly translates Hebrew *ve-hitvadu* (והתודו), as "declare." Hence, he is saying that the penitent's remorse must be articulated.[14] Indeed, it must be declared to be just as God sees it!

C. Twenty Percent

The Torah elaborates on yet another detail in the judicial process if someone sins. This is the concept of making restitution. Biblical restitution is the principle of not just returning a stolen object or money to the person from whom it was taken. It also requires that they are given 20% above what it is worth. That is rather straightforward. The question, however, is "Why is restitution necessary?"

R. K. Harrison suggests that it was a means of deterrent. He writes, "As a result of presenting the restitution directly to the offended party and not by means of a substitute, the transgressor would be less likely to commit such an offense in the future, because his behavior would become public knowledge."[15] Rabbi Elie Munk, on the other hand, suggests that the payment of the restitution was, along with the offering of a sacrifice, part of the actual atonement process itself. He writes, "The extra fifth and the associated sacrifice are not punishments but means of absolution."[16]

This viewpoint (it did not originate with Munk!) gives rise to a rather interesting interpretation of the restitution process. The Rambam teaches in his *Mishnah Torah* that the one who feels guilt, freely confesses his sin, and seeks to make amends, needs also to make restitution. Whereas the one who is not truly repentant continues to claim he is not guilty, but is found guilty by a court, only needs to pay back what was taken, but not the restitution.

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12. Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bamidbar,* 46.
13. Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Bamidbar*, 41.
14. Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 35.
15. R. K. Harrison, *Numbers* (TOTC), 104.
16. Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Bamidbar,* 42.

Summarizing Rambam's views, Munk explains, “Rambam teaches that the *asham* [guilt offering] absolves only those who have repented. Thus, if the sinner does not change his attitude and show his sincere desire to redeem himself, neither the offering nor the extra fifth is of the slightest value.”[17]

4. No Relatives

The final new piece of information this passage provides us, over its counterpart in Leviticus concerning the judicial process for offenses to another person, is **5:8–10**. These verses speak of a case where restitution needs to be made but the offended person has died leaving no relatives to whom the payment can be made. In such a case the money is given to the Lord through the Kohanim.

However, some commentators have made a valid point about this principle and ask: When is it that a Jewish person has no relatives, especially at that time when family genealogies were being solidified? Rashi typifies this objection. He states, “Is there a person in Israel who has no redeemers? Either a son or a daughter or some related kin from his father’s family, tracing the relationship upward until our forefather Jacob? But this referred to a convert who died, and has no heirs, for he had not fathered children as a Jew.”[18]

Hence, the standard Jewish viewpoint is that **5:8–10** refers to a convert to Judaism, the one who has no heirs in Israel. We can only add that the other possibility is that the offended one was not a convert but just a non-Jew who lived among the people. The word used in the text is *ger* (גר), which, we have noticed before, did not refer to a convert in the time of Moshe. That concept came later, in the Second Temple Period. Rather a ger was a resident foreigner among the people of Isreal. In either case the midrash's remarks on this subject are equally applicable. It says, “The Torah laid down equal treatment for the native Israelite and the proselyte [foreigner], and taking by violence from either must be expiated by payment of a fine and an atonement offering.[19]

Conclude

The next passage in Numbers also contains more teaching on the practice of justice in the covenant community. However, that is for next week’s commentator! We will stop here. It is a relatively easy passage, yet ever so practical — and necessary for ancient Israel to understand if they are going to live with each other when they get to the Promised Land. It is also just as necessary for all of us to understand and practice in our holy communities today.

17. Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Bamidbar,* 42.
18. *Rashi: Bamidbar*, ArtScroll Edition, 43.
19. Bamidbar Rabbah 8.2