WISDOM FROM THE WILDERNESS “Numbers” may be the name by which the fourth of the Five Books of Moses is commonly called, but in the Hebrew original it is known as Bamidbar, or “In the Wilderness.” It is interesting to note that this Parshah is always read immediately before the festival of Shavuot, “the season of the giving of the Torah.” What is the connection?

The Sages teach that it is not enough for G-d to give us the Torah; we have to be ready to receive the Torah. What makes us worthy recipients of this most precious and infinite gift from G-d? This is where the “wilderness” idea comes in. A wilderness is a no-man’s land. It is ownerless and barren. Just as a desert is empty and desolate, so does a student of Torah need to know that he is but an “empty vessel.” Humility is a vital prerequisite if we are to successfully absorb divine wisdom.

As long as we are full of ourselves and our preconceived notions, we will not be able to assimilate and integrate Torah into our being. Even if are already somewhat accomplished in our Torah studies, we still need to remember—as the Kotzker Rebbe put it—that “as much as you know, you are still an undeveloped wilderness.”

Then there is the idea that an ownerless wilderness is there for anyone to stake his claim. No person or group of people has a monopoly on Torah. It belongs to each and every single Jew, not just the rabbis or the yeshivah students, or the religiously observant. “The Torah that Moses commanded us is the heritage of the entire Congregation of Jacob” (Deuteronomy 33:4). While we acknowledge that there is much hard work ahead of us if we are to acquire the Torah and make it ours, we also know that with diligence and effort we can succeed. Indeed, some of our finest Torah scholars throughout the generations have hailed from the simple, ordinary folk—tailors, cobbler and the like. Maimonides, in his Mishneh Torah (Laws of Torah Study 3:1), states: “With three crowns was Israel adorned—the crown of Torah, the crown of the priesthood and the crown of royalty. The priesthood was the privilege of Aaron . . . royalty was the privilege of King David . . . the crown of Torah is there ready and waiting for all of Israel . . . and it is the greatest crown of all.”

However, while Torah may be “free for all” as a desert wilderness, we must surrender ourselves to it, emptying ourselves of our ego and our preconceptions, rather than attempting to adjust it to our own circumstances and lifestyles.

And then, like the empty and uninhabited wilderness, the Torah personality may well find himself alone and isolated. We might express our strongly held values and beliefs, only to discover that we stand alone. We might display the courage of our convictions and find ourselves, like Abraham, “on the other side” of the whole world. Our principles may well prove unpopular, especially should they step on toes or upset apple carts. No matter. Being true to G-d and His Torah means standing by it, under any and every circumstance. May the literal title of our Parshah of Bamidbar, and the many lessons it conveys, serve as a fitting prelude for the beautiful festival of Shavuot. May we receive the Torah with joy and earnestness, so that this important festival will be both memorable and meaningful.

by Rabbi Yossy Goldman

IS G-D JUST TREATING ME LIKE A NUMBER?
The funny thing about customer service is that it often doesn’t serve the customer. “To them I’m not a person, just an account number,” customers often complain. And there is nothing quite so cold as being treated like a number.

Strikingly, the fourth book of the Torah, Bamidbar, is referred to as the Book of Numbers. At the beginning of the book, a year after the Jews left Egypt, G-d instructs Moses to conduct a census of Israel, the firstborns and the Levites. And at the end of the book, in Year 40 of wandering in the desert, G-d once again instructs Moses to count the people. Why all this counting? Hence the name “Book of Numbers,” or in Hebrew, Chumash ha-Pekudim.

Why all this counting? The commentaries explain that counting expresses G-d’s love and care for His nation. That seems counterintuitive. A census just gives you a bunch of numbers for each tribe and group, nothing personal. How is that loving and caring?

The standard Hebrew word for counting is cheshbon or...
minyan. But throughout the Torah a different word, pekudim, is used. This word and its derivatives are used in many different ways throughout the Torah and Prophets. Among them are:

1. To remember, as in “G-d remembered (pakad) Sarah . . . and Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son to Abraham,” (Genesis 21:1.) or in G-d’s promise to take the Jewish people out of Egypt: “G-d will surely remember you (pakod yifkod) and bring you out of this land.” (Genesis 50:24.)
2. To be missed, as in the famous haftorah about David and Jonathan: “David’s place was missing (vayipakeid).” (I Samuel 20:25.)
3. To assign, as in the responsibilities of the Levites: “And the assignment of (pekudat) the Merari family.” (Numbers 3:36.)
4. Destiny, as in Korach’s rebellion: “And the destiny (pekudat) of all men will be brought upon them.” (Numbers 16:29.)
5. Accounting, as when Moses gives an accounting for all the donations to construct the Tabernacle: “This is the accounting (pekudei) of the Tabernacle.” (Exodus 38:21.)
6. To command (in Modern Hebrew). Why so many usages for this word? I believe there is one unifying definition: “to take notice.” When G-d remembers Sarah, He takes notice of her and blesses her with a child. When G-d takes notice of the Jewish people, He sends Moses to take them out of Egypt. When No one gets overlooked. David is absent from King Saul’s table, his absence is noticed. The Levites are noted for their assignment and special role in the Tabernacle. The same goes for a command—you are taking notice of the person you are commanding.

When G-d instructs Moses to count the Jewish nation, G-d says pekd, not meneh. G-d doesn’t simply want a number to put into his spreadsheet. G-d wants Moses to take notice of every single Jew. Because G-d loves and cares for every individual. No one gets overlooked. Chumash ha-Pekudit—a whole book of G-d taking notice of the Jewish people. What great love

By Rabbi Sholom Raichik

SHAVUOT The holiday of Shavuot is a two-day holiday, beginning at sundown of the 5th of Sivan and lasting until nightfall of the 7th of Sivan (June 8–10, 2019). The word Shavuot (or Shavuos) means “weeks.” It celebrates the completion of the seven-week Omer counting period between Passover and Shavuot. The Torah was given by G-d to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai on Shavuot more than 3,300 years ago. Every year on the holiday of Shavuot we renew our acceptance of G-d’s gift, and G-d “re-gives” the Torah. Customarily, we try to increase our dairy food on this holiday.