

# The Phantom Tollbooth and the Meaning of Numbers

Parashat Bemidbar, Numbers, Chapters 1-4 | June 2, 2022

There was once a boy named Milo, who didn't know what to do with himself—not just sometimes, but always.

So begins *The Phantom Tollbooth*, one of my favorite books as a child and, I believe, one of the best children's book ever written. Six decades ago, Norton Juster, a young architect, received a grant to write a book for children about the field of urban design. He tried, but it wasn't working, so he went on vacation to Fire Island to think. While his time off did not help him at all in writing this work, it allowed him to conceive of another one.

As we are told in the introduction to the annotated edition of *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Juster suddenly recalled a conversation with a child a few days before:

A boy of about ten had sat down next to him and launched into a freewheeling conversation about math. "What is the biggest number there is?" the boy had gamely demanded. "I already knew," Juster later recalled, "that when a kid asks you a question, you answer with another question....So I said, 'Tell me what *you* think the biggest number is.' His reply was something like, 'A billion skillion katrillion.' Then I said, 'Well, add one to it.' Then we started talking back and forth, and we were very quickly talking about infinity."

This led to Juster's book about Milo, who sees no value in what he is asked to learn, and is bequeathed a magical tollbooth that takes him to Dictionopolis and Digitopolis, the land of words and the land of numbers. And it is to *The Phantom Tollbooth* that we turn as we attempt to understand a sacred biblical book that

is known for numbers, and which will lead us to learn how the meaning of our lives lies in part in the nature of numbers themselves.

The book known as "Numbers" in English begins with a command by God to Moses that is all about numbers:

*Take ye the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families of their father's houses, according to their names, every male, every head;*

*From twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel...*  
(Numbers 1:2-3)

The reason for this count appears quite clear. As the medieval exegete Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir explains, with the Sinai revelation concluded and the Tabernacle constructed, Israel is preparing to march into the Holy Land to conquer it. What is created here is a military formation with the census taken to prepare for battle. The count, therefore, focuses on those Israelites designated to fight. The Levites, who are effectively the clergy of the nation, are not meant for the military, but rather to minister in the Holy. The Levites are thus not numbered here, but on their own in the chapters that follow. But the way in which the Bible describes the nature of numbering tells us something larger about Israel, not merely about its military men.

In a passage in *The Phantom Tollbooth* inspired by Juster's original conversation with the young boy in the restaurant, the young Milo visits Digitopolis, the land of numbers, and he asks to see the number of the greatest magnitude. He, in turn, is informed that the name of that number is "infinity" and that it can be found up a nearby staircase. Milo is eager to discover

so vast a number, and so up the stairs he goes. But the stairway to “Infinity” is, well, infinite, and he ultimately collapses.

Then Milo meets a strange sort of individual:

“Pardon me for staring,” said Milo, after he had been staring for some time, “but I’ve never seen half a child before.”

“It’s .58 to be precise,” replied the child from the left side of his mouth (which happened to be the only side of his mouth).

“I beg your pardon?” said Milo.

“It’s .58,” he repeated; “it’s a little bit *more* than a half.”

“Have you always been that way?” asked Milo impatiently, for he felt that that was a needlessly fine distinction.

“My goodness, no,” the child assured him. “A few years ago I was just .42 and, believe me, that was terribly inconvenient.”

“What is the rest of your family like?” said Milo, this time a bit more sympathetically.

“Oh, we’re just the average family,” he said thoughtfully; “mother, father, and 2.58 children—and, as I explained, I’m the .58.”

“It must be rather odd being only part of a person,” Milo remarked.

“Not at all,” said the child. “Every average family has 2.58 children, so I always have someone to play with. Besides, each family also has an average of 1.3 automobiles, and since I’m the only one who can drive three tenths of a car, I get to use it all the time.”

Thus does the author allow the imagination of a child reading this book to explore the nature of numbers, the meaning of math, and what averages are all about. But averages are a mathematical construct; in contrast, even as the Israelites are numbered in military preparation, what is emphasized is that in biblical Israel, no one is considered average—every individual is treasured, unique.

To better understand this, we move on to chapter two. The military formations of the tribes are arranged around the Tabernacle—12 tribes in all, with Joseph doubled into two tribes (Ephraim and Manasseh) and the Levites uncounted. These 12 tribes are divided into four contingents of three tribes each, with one contingent on each side of the Tabernacle. There is a more prominent tribe in each contingent. One contingent is led by Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn through Leah. The second is led by Ephraim, the most important son of Joseph, Rachel’s first born. A third is led by Dan, who is the largest of the tribes not born to Rachel or Leah. The contingent opposite that of Dan is represented not by a firstborn, but rather by Judah, who had been slated for leadership by Jacob’s blessing. The Bible will later state that Dan brings up the rear, placing Judah at the forefront. And as Israel is militarily arrayed, the Tabernacle sits at the center of the camp, maintained by the tribe of Levi. Thus, Rabbi Dr. Yonatan Grossman, who explains this desert arrangement, notes that even though prominence is given to specific tribes—and perhaps to Judah above all—each of the tribes in the military encampment is equally close to the Sanctuary that is at the center.

He offers several explanations for the significance of this. Here is one of them:

[T]he form of encampment of the tribes around the Mishkan also had educational value. In this way, all the tribes dwelled at the same distance from the Mishkan (with the exception, of course, of the tribe of Levi). The intertribal hierarchy (which existed in the nature of the division of tribes into the various “camps”) was thus less glaring, since the basic shape of the camp was a square (or circle), with all observing

a fixed distance from the resting place of the Divine Presence. Thus it was clear that everyone had the same opportunity, with the same effort, of reaching the holy place.

Professor Grossman's point is profound, and there is more to add here. Because each tribe, and indeed each individual, is placed at a different point around the Tabernacle, their perspectives are equidistant, but they are not the same. Each beholds the Tabernacle from a different vantage point. In one wonderful moment in *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Milo and his friends encounter a strange boy named Alec, whose head is much higher than Milo's, for he walks on air. Milo wonders how this is so, and the boy explains:

"Well," said the boy, "in my family, everyone is born in the air, with his head at exactly the height it's going to be when he's an adult, and then we all grow toward the ground. When we're fully grown up or, as you can see, grown down, our feet finally touch. Of course, there are a few of us whose feet never reach the ground no matter how old we get, but I suppose it's the same in every family."

And then he continues:

"You certainly must be very old to have reached the ground already."

"Oh no," said Milo seriously. "In my family we all start on the ground and grow up, and we never know how far until we actually get there."

"What a silly system." The boy laughed. "Then your head keeps changing its height and you always see things in a different way? Why, when you're fifteen things won't look at all the way they did when you were ten, and at twenty everything will change again."

"I suppose so," replied Milo, for he had never really thought about the matter.

To look at life from a different vantage point is to see the world differently, and that is certainly true when it comes to one's encounter with the sacred. Every tribe is an equal distance from the Holy, but each encounter with the Almighty is singular. Thus, the encampment blends individuality and collectivity within each tribe, each family, each Israelite, with each uniquely contributing to Israel's relationship with God. They are a fighting force, but at the center of their encampment is the Divine. They fight, and they live, and they love for something larger than war or power itself.

Thus, the numbering and encampment of Israel is meant to teach us something eternal. My father noted to me that another word for counting throughout the Torah, "*sefira*," or in the infinitive, "*lispor*," also has a deeper meaning. For the word shares the same root as "*sefer*," "scroll" or "book," as well as "*sipur*," story.

One can therefore suggest that if the rabbis referred to this biblical book as "*Chumash Hapekudim*," the part of the Pentateuch dedicated to counting, the larger point is that we are meant to learn from biblical numbering; to seek our own unique part within our larger tale as a people in communion with, and in dedication to, those who came before. Throughout these initial chapters and numbers, as Israel is counted, it is emphasized that the census is done "*l'mishpechotam l'veit avotam*." Israelites are counted, appointed, sanctified, as part of their families and their fathers' houses, all surrounding the dwelling place of the Divine—thereby embodying family, faith, and sanctity. Therefore, later in the Book of Numbers, when the prophet Balaam will stand at an overlook and see Israel arrayed before him, he will proclaim, "*How goodly are your tents, O Jacob...*" (Numbers 24:5)

As Professor Yonatan Grossman writes:

The untamed desert bespeaks a world without boundaries: it is wild, devoid of order and regulation, a place without human habitation, a place where wild animals reign. Here, in the midst of the lack of boundaries that the desert embodies, a marvelous sight reveals itself..

And as he further suggests the holiness of the camp is:

...connected first and foremost to the internal and intimate relationships within each individual tent, so that even in the wild, untamed desert, every child knows who is his father and who is his mother.

The camp of Israel in the Book of Numbers is a military formation, but family and faith are what lie at its heart. Israelites are numbered within their larger story, and they are ever aware that at the center of the camp dwells the presence of a God whose knowledge, wisdom, and power exceed any number. And that this God lends meaning to the very numbering taking place.

In *The Phantom Tollbooth*, when Milo meets the 0.58 of a child, he complains that averages are mathematical abstracts, not real.

The 0.58 of a person responds,

“...one of the nicest things about mathematics, or anything else you might care to learn, is that many of the things which can never be, often are. You see,” he went on, “it’s very much like your trying to reach Infinity. You know that it’s there, but you just don’t know where—but just because you can never reach it doesn’t mean that it’s not worth looking for.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” said Milo, starting down the stairs. “I think I’ll go back now.”

“A wise decision,” the child agreed; “but try again someday—perhaps you’ll get much closer.”

The point of course, is that counterintuitively, in striving and failing to reach “Infinity,” Milo better understands what infinity is. In the biblical arrangement of the tribes, each Israelite experiences a unique glimpse of the Presence of the Infinite Almighty, in a story about counting where everyone counts.

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*Discussion Questions:*

1. The argument put forward here is that the arrangement of the nation's camp describes the different relationships that the Israelites have with God. How might this go hand in hand with a system of Jewish law where commandments apply to all of Israel?