

PARSHAT BAMIDBAR 2021 – SOURCE SHEET

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ARE THERE 600,000 LETTERS IN THE TORAH?

According to the Zohar Chadash on Shir HaShirim, there are 600,000 letters in a Sefer Torah, corresponding to the 600,000 souls of the twelve tribes of the Jewish people, the number counted in Parshat Bamidbar, and 40 years later in Parshat Pinchas. The Megaleh Amukot (Va'etchanan 186:1) also writes that the soul of every Jew has its origins in one of the 600,000 letters of the Torah. The name "Yisrael" is an acronym for the words: **Yesh Shishim Ribo Otiyot LaTorah** – "there are sixty myriad (600,000) letters in the Torah".

The problem is this. There are only 304,805 letters in a Torah scroll. So what is the Zohar Chadash and everyone who relies on this count, like the Megaleh Amukot, talking about? (Also, it is worth noting that the actual count of Israelites in Bamidbar was 603,550.)

This is what Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook (1865–1935) wrote:

When we think about a Torah scroll, we usually only consider the letters themselves, written in black ink. But the Talmud in Menachot (29a) rules that every letter in a Torah scroll must be completely surrounded by parchment. This requirement is called mukaf gevil. Which means that the white parchment around the letters is an integral part of the Torah; without it, the Torah scroll is disqualified. In fact, the white space is a higher form of Torah. It is analogous to the white fire of Sinai — a sublime, hidden Torah that cannot be read in the usual manner.

There is a delicate balance between black and white in the Torah. The shirot, the poetic portions in the Torah, are written in a special fashion, like a wall constructed from layers of black and white bricks. These poetic sections are the loftiest parts of the Torah. Consequently, they have more white space, as they contain a greater measure of the esoteric white fire. If a scribe were to write other sections of the Torah in this special layout, the Torah scroll would be pasul (rendered invalid). After the Torah was revealed and restricted to our limited world, it must be written with the appropriate ratio of black to white.

So, if each letter is surrounded by "white" that makes it a double letter, and you have the 600,000 letters in the Torah – namely, twice 304,805.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founding Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch, has another answer. The count of 600,000 includes vowel letters that are not included in the text, but which are implied in the pronunciation of the word. If they were all to be written out in full, there would be many more letters in a Torah scroll, and the total would be 600,000.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky in his sefer, Emes LeYaakov, offers the suggestion that many letters are made up of other letters – for example an aleph is a Vav and two Yuds. The correct total of all the letters if they are broken down in this way is 600,000.

Rabbi Zev Leff, in his book on Shemoneh Esrei, reinterprets the quote from Zohar Chadash so that it is read in a way that doesn't claim there are 600,000 letters. He suggests that the words יש ששים רבוא לתורה does not mean "there are 600k letters in the Torah" – which he says would have been more accurately expressed with בתורה instead of לתורה – but rather "there are 600,000 letters to the Torah," which he suggests means that, in addition to the around 300,000 letters of the Torah, the "Torah" of the Jewish people, made up of 600,000 letters, is meant to be added. By which he means, Torah Shel Baal Peh. An interesting, if not entirely convincing idea.

But let's go back to Rav Kamenetzky's suggestion. In 2003, Moshe Dodo ben Barzilai came up with an interesting idea that had nothing to do with this particular problem of the 600,000 letters in the Torah. He proposed a method of gematria that he called *Mispar haBeka*, where each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is "split" into its component letters and then these component letters are added up, giving a specific number to each letter. For example, the letter Alef is comprised of two Yuds and a Vav, so its value is 26. The letter Bet is composed of three Vavs, so its value is 18. Gimmel is composed of a Zayin and a Yud, so it amounts to 17, etc. etc.

In 2008, mathematician Jeffrey Meiliken posted a blog article using a similar method to try and find the 600,000 letters in a Sefer Torah. His source for the frequency of each letter in the Torah was wrong and some of the number components he used were problematic, but his count came very close to 600,000. In 2010, Moshe Dodo saw Meiliken's blog, and it triggered a thought. He checked his method of splitting the letters for gematria against the actual letters of Torah and found that it added up to exactly 600,000 letters. By splitting the letters up and adding the actual letter he had the solution.

He discussed it with Jeffrey Meilikin – who published a blog article and their proposal to show that the Torah has 600,000 letters – here is the link <http://kabbalahsecrets.com/?p=110>

Below is the table which shows how the count works – a fascination solution to an ancient problem.

	Ord Value	# of Letters	Component Letters	Tot'l Letters
alef	1	27059	4	108236
bet	2	16345	3	49035
gimmel	3	2109	2	4218
dalet	4	7032	1	7032
he	5	28056	2	56112
vav	6	30513	1	30513
chet	7	2198	1	2198
zayin	8	7189	2	14378
tet	9	1804	2	3608
yud	10	31531	1	31531
caf	11	8610	1	8610
lamed	12	21570	2	43140
mem	13	14465	2	28930
nun	14	9867	1	9867
samech	15	1833	1	1833
ayin	16	11250	2	22500
pe	17	3975	2	7950
zaddi	18	2927	2	5854
koof	19	4695	2	9390
resh	20	18125	1	18125
Shin	21	15595	3	46785
Tav	22	17950	2	35900
caf sofit	23	3358	1	3358
mem sofit	24	10625	4	42500
nun sofit	25	4259	1	4259
Pe sofit	26	830	2	1660
Zaddi sofit	27	1035	2	2070
	378	304805	50	599592