



THE SENSE OF A CENSUS

The Book we open this Shabbat describes the census of the people in the wilderness.

There were over 600,000 Israelites (males of military age), one for each letter and space in the Torah. If you count the entire people - men, women and children - you come to a total of about two to three million.

Now compare this with Jewish population movements in later ages. By the time of the Romans there might have been 10 million Jews. Thereafter the number declined so that at the onset of the modern era there might have been no more than one million.

At the beginning of the Sho'ah the numbers had increased rather dramatically and there were something like 18 million Jews. In the present century we have recouped some of our numbers and we probably have 15 or 16 million Jews, of whom almost half live in Israel.

The numbers are interesting but when dealing with statistics we need to assess both quantity and quality. It worries me that not every one of our people is a top-quality Jew, though

God knows and loves every one of us and we are all capable of intensifying out Jewish quality.

BANNERS & BORDERS

The Israelite camp in the wilderness was massive and sprawling. How did people find their way home? The Torah says that the camp was organised, "everyone according to his banner and sign, according to one's father's house" (Bamidbar 2:1-2).

The Mishkan was in the centre. Grouped around it were the tribes - Yehuda (with Yissachar and Zevulun) in the east, Reuven (with Shimon and Gad) in the south, Efrayim (with Menashe and Binyamin) in the west, Dan (with Asher and Naftali) in the north. The camp was laid out in geometrical precision and the area allocated to each tribe had its flag.

The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 2:3) says that the structure was motivated by the Almighty's wish to give dignity to each tribe. Thousands of ministering angels worked on the design of the camp. Each group of angels subsequently identified with one of the tribes so that no tribe could lose its identity and no individual could end up in the wrong section of the camp. **OZ**