

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



let me **COUNT** the ways

Parshat Bamidbar

A few weeks ago, in another of these musings, I discussed how close we Jews come to suffering from arithmomania, the compulsion to count things. That tendency reaches its apex in this week's Torah reading. We get heavily involved in the census of B'nei Yisrael in the MIDBAR. Even though the purpose of the count seems straight forward enough: We must know how many fighting-age men are available for the army. However, the terms accompanying the command show a different picture.

The command begins by God informing Moshe that the 'heads of every member of the community must be counted' (S'U, perhaps 'raised'). Then the names must be counted or assigned numbers. In the next verse, we are told that we are counting army-age males. Finally, those capable of bearing arms are TIFK'DU, counted, assigned, recorded, enumerated, registered, listed, numbered, mustered, enrolled, organized. Pick your translation, all of those listed here appear on the Biblegateway website.

Since this tedious process will be repeated at the end of the book of Bamidbar, it's not surprising that our Sages call this book of the Torah SEFER HAPIKUDIM, the 'book of censuses'. That term is also used to denote assignment or purpose, TAFKID. So, perhaps we should call it the Book of Roles.

There are three verbs used in our two verses for the counting process. So, I would posit that we are interested in three issues or attributes. First, we have the simple existence of the individual (count the head), on a battlefield numbers count. Second, the name and family of the individual suggest that there are expectations for the individual based on background and upbringing. Third, and most important, assignment - TAFKID, based on observed skills, talents, or potential within each individual.

On an ethical level, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein z"l wrote: When seeking to shape our personalities according to Torah values, we must relate to at least three levels of expectation and responsibility. These can be regarded as concentric circles, moving from the broader to the more specific:

- 1) the universal demands placed upon one simply as a human being;
- 2) the demands of being a Jew;

3) the responsibilities of a ben-Torah, one who makes Torah study a central part of his life and embodies its values.

In other words, there are three criteria being cataloged in our census, and the three verbs for counting present them. I believe strongly that the third, TIFK'DU OTAM is the most important. The Ramban suggests that the emphasis here is on turning twenty, because that's when one reaches maturity. Mystically, we say that no one is culpable for their actions in the Heavenly Court for transgressions committed before that birthday. Rabbeinu Bechaye adds that the term implies Divine Supervision and expresses how precious each individual is to God.

The Mei Shilo'ach adds to that idea. He declares: The matter of counting relates to what is said in the Gemara (B'rachot 58a), "One man's mind is not similar to another's." God allotted goodness and life to each individual, and no one is similar to his fellow... If one were to exchange one person's place for another's, then the condition of the tribe would be incomplete. This may be likened to one who plants a garden in an intricate order, where if one planting is missing or exchanged for another,

then it will be clear that the garden is not complete. And Israel is called (Yeshayahu 61:3), 'the planting of God in which He is glorified.'

Rav Lichtenstein's co-Rosh Yeshiva Rav Yehuda Amital z"l expressed another concern. We do, indeed, have practical needs to know how many bodies can be placed on a battlefield, but there is a huge ethical problem: We count things that are alike; hence, counting implies that each item is equal. People are not to be counted. Each person is unique.

Rav Amital added a Midrashic explanation to assuage this massive difficulty: It is written, "Each man by his banner, according to his OTOT" (Bamidbar 2:2). OTOT refers to insignia, but literally it means also "letters"; hence the idea that each individual has his own letter in the Torah.

We have a continual tension to look at society as a whole while never denying each individual their uniqueness. How can we reconcile this conundrum, and keep a society functioning and spiritually healthy? Reb Amital continued: There is terrible hatred today between the various groups and sectors of our nation... We will end up, heaven forbid, in a situation of Kamtza and Bar-Kamtza: a very great love for

fellow Jews - but only those who are like us, people of our circle. Anyone who is not part of our camp should kindly keep to himself... Rav Kook used to say that the Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred, and it will be rebuilt only by virtue of baseless love. We dare not close our eyes to what is going on around us. A person must react to his environment, but at the same time we must preserve and guard the unity of the nation, and avoid responding to hatred with more hatred.

God forbid we are heading to catastrophe if we continue in our present path of hatred for fellow Jews. We must reread our parsha's instructions to not only count every Jew, but to also see their attributes and contributions. If we can't find ways to appreciate every Jewish soul, we are doomed. As we celebrate the reunification of our beloved capital this week, let us remember part of its greatness is its ability to 'bind us all together' (IR SHECHUBRA LAH YACHDAV, T'hilim 122:4).

Count every Jew AND believe that every Jew counts! 