

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

BAMIDBAR

G-d spoke to Moshe... Lift up the heads (count) of the entire assembly of the Israelites... by the number of names... you and Aharon shall count them... (1:1-3).

This is the second time that Moshe counted the Israelites. The first occasion was several months previously - when he counted them after the Cheit HaEigel, through the silver half shekels that were subsequently processed for structures in the Mishkan.

Why was it necessary to count the Israelites a second time at all? There had not been a disaster that reduced the number of people since the first headcount. Also, why was the second census carried out in a different way? The first time the Israelites were counted as one large unit. This time, they were counted by name, according to tribe.

A possible approach may be the following. The Israelites had matured as a nation, and it was now time to direct them to develop as tribes and individuals. The expression of 'lifting up the heads' first occurs with Pharaoh where he is described as 'lifting up the heads' of his chief butler and his chief baker, which

means that on their release from prison they were counted as being members of his exclusive servant community. Similarly, this counting was to enable those counted to be members of G-d's exclusive servant community, as official members of Am Yisrael marching forward to conquer the Land. This we will now explain.

Looking at the details of how the census was carried out on this occasion shows the following:

According to the number of names: all those who were counted personally gave their names to Moshe and Aharon (see Ramban to 1:2). This meant that Moshe was not a remote figure, but that he had actually spoken to all those he counted.

According to the tribes themselves: each tribe had special characteristics, as were enumerated by Yaakov on his death (B'reishit 49), and confirmed and developed by Moshe at the end of his life (D'varim 33).

According to the flags with the insignias of the fathers' houses (2:2): the Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 2:6) brings the tradition that the colors and insignias of the flags related to the personal characteristics of the respective tribes. For example Levi's was white, black, and red, with the Urim v'Tumim; Gad's was grey, with a battalion of soldiers, and so on.

Him in all your (different) ways...
(Mishlei 3:6).  

At the time of the Giving of the Torah the Israelites were as one people - "as one man with one heart" (see Rashi to Sh'mot 19:2). Unity was necessary to bring the Shechina (Divine Presence) to the Israelites - which came through the Revelation at Mount Sinai. But however much unity in thought and purpose was desirable at that moment, it was not a long-term ideal. Now that the Shechina was established through the Mishkan, the Israelites had to develop their G-d given gifts - their personal and tribal individuality.

When G-d commanded Moshe to take the census this time, he was told to raise the Israelites. This meant that the purpose of the census was not just to record the number of people, but also to spiritually develop those very people through the process of counting them. He was told to do this by recognizing the individuality of each person - by the number of names; and the diverse, distinct characteristics of each tribe - according to the tribes... according to the flags. This was the next opportunity for the spiritual development of the Israelites - to grow within the Torah framework by developing their individual strengths, and not just emulate a single model.

In short this was a step to develop the inherent pluralism in the Torah Nation: towards the ideal of Know