



Parshat Bamidbar - Everybody Counts Rabbi Andrew Pepperstone

Rabbi-in-Residence

apepperstone@grossschechter.org

I have been told that my great grandmother never told anybody the exact number of grandchildren she had. When asked how many she had, she would reply with some number in the mid-teens. Naturally, I asked why she would do this, to which the reply was always the same: she was trying to avoid the *ayin hara*, or the evil eye. She was well aware of the popular belief that if you give an exact number for something, it would bring evil and misfortune upon that which you are counting. Perhaps you have been to a morning or evening minyan, and they are trying to figure out how many people they have so far. When I have been in this situation, I have heard people use a ten-word phrase, such as the *Motzi brachah*, or count like this: not-one, not-two, etc. What is the source for this aversion to counting people? Why not just use numbers? It would save time! As it turns out, it begins in the beginning of our story as a nation, in the book of Shemot.

The first time that God counts us as a people was while we were camping at Mount Sinai:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: When you take a census of the Israelite people according to their enrollment, each shall pay the Lord a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled. This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay: a half-shekel by the sanctuary weight — twenty gerahs to the shekel — a half-shekel as an offering to the Lord.

Everyone who is entered in the records, from the age of twenty years up, shall give the Lord's offering: the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel when giving the Lord's offering as expiation for your persons. You shall take the expiation money from the Israelites and assign it to the service of the Tent of Meeting; it shall serve the Israelites as a reminder before the Lord, as expiation for your persons. (Shemot 30: 11-16)

This first census has three interesting features:

First, there is no direct counting of the people. Every person over the age of 20 years or older turns in a coin, and in turn the leaders counted the coins to ascertain the number of adults among the people. Again, we see that directly counting people is avoided.

Secondly, everyone gives a half-shekel coin made from silver, no more, no less, no matter what his or her financial means might be. This was not a fundraiser for the Mishkan (though

that comes later on). Every adult gives the exact same amount, teaching us that every person is equally valuable in God's eyes, and should be equally valuable in our eyes as well. We are all made in God's image, and no amount of money can compare to one person's life.

Third, this money turns up in the Mishkan as the silver hooks used to hang the woven cloths that make the Mishkan's walls. Everyone contributed something essential to the Mishkan. Without one of the silver hooks, the Mishkan would be incomplete. It was not until Moses put up the final piece of the Mishkan that God's presence began to dwell in it. It takes every single one of us together to fully experience God's presence. God needs us all.

This was the first census and not the last. Rashi comments that "because they were dear to God, God counts them all the time - when they went out of Egypt, God counted them; when many of them fell for having worshipped the golden calf, God counted them to ascertain how many were left, when the *Shechina* was about to dwell among them, God again took their census, for on the first day of Nisan the Mishkan was assembled, and shortly afterward, on the first day of Iyar, God counted them".

The final counting in Rashi's comment is the census from this week's portion Bemidbar. It is far different from the first counting of the people at Sinai, even though they take place in the same location less than one year later:

"Take a census of the entire Israelite community. Do it by families following the paternal line according to the names of each male, taken individually." (Bamidbar 1:2)

This verse contains a contradiction. Are they to count everyone or only the males? In classic Jewish form, the answer is: both. According to Rashbam, Rashi's grandson, the purpose of this census is clear: Israel is about to leave Sinai with the Law in hand, ready to enter the land of Canaan and fight a war. They need to get their troops ready. Therefore, this census is primarily a military one.

That said, there is more in the verse that needs explanation. In the commentary *Siftei Kohen*, it says that Moses was also explicitly commanded *not* to count the people in the way that an object would be counted (one, two, three, etc.), but rather "according to their names". To count people like objects would signify that a particular person had a finite value, which we know to be the exact opposite. A human life has infinite value. So why not just use another indirect method to count the people, as they did earlier with these half-shekels? According to Don Isaac Abarbanel, the 15th century Spanish commentator, this census was done in order to maintain the dignity and integrity of every person in the nation. Every single person came before Moses, was called by name, recorded and then given a personal blessing.

In addition, a source from the Babylonian Talmud (Hullin, chapter 8) gives some context to my great-grand mother's aversion to counting people. It says:

Anything numbered, fastened securely or precisely measured is immune to destructive forces, but counting is not an effective defense against the "evil eye" [for envy]. On

the contrary, direct counting is harmful. In fact, for this very reason, as protection against the “evil eye” the half-shekel procedure of census taking was instituted.

The bottom line is that how we count ourselves reflects the love that we should have for each other. When we acknowledge that we are each made in God’s image, that we should treat each other in a dignified manner, that we each have unique gifts to offer the world and protect each other from whatever evil forces we are able, we demonstrate our love for each other, which is a reflection of the love that God has for each of us. Hillel the Elder summarized the entire Torah in the one verse from Parshat Kedoshim: “Love your neighbor as yourself”. The rest is commentary, now go and study.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Pepperstone

AS A FAMILY:

- Make sure that you complete the 2010 US Census form, which is taking place now. It helps our community get access to federal funding for local needs. Do the form as a family.
- In Bamidbar, Israel is getting ready for their journey in the wilderness. Talk with your family about preparing for a long trip. What do you do to get ready? How do you prepare?
- Sometimes, a long journey can get boring and people complain. During their journey, Israel is going to do a lot of complaining. Talk about what you each find boring. What do you do when you are bored? Does whining or complaining help? Why might it be important to be bored sometimes?

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK’S TORAH PORTION [BAMIDBAR](#), ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. According to the instructions for taking a census, who was to be counted?
2. How did Moses and Aaron know who to choose as heads of tribes and how many were to be selected?
3. How many Israelites over the age of 20 years were counted and what were they selected to do?
4. What special duty was given to the Levites?
5. How were the Levites counted?
6. Who were the five families appointed to surround the Tent of Meeting?
7. Aaron and his sons were appointed as what? What was the relationship between the Levites and the *Kohanim* (priests)?
8. The Levites were selected rather than whom to serve God, and what was the rationale for this?
9. How were first-born sons redeemed? Were all the first-borns redeemed?
10. Who was appointed to receive the redemption money of the first-borns?