

# Taking a Census in the Wilderness

## A D'var Torah on *Parashat B'midbar* (Num. 1:1 – 4:20)

By Alan I. Friedman

*“Vay'dabeir Adonai el Moshe b'midbar Sinai b'ohel moeid...”*  
*“And God spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting...”*

**“S'u et-rosh kol-adat b'nei-Yisrael... — Take a census<sup>1</sup> of the entire Israelite community...”** The Book of Numbers begins where the Book of Exodus left off, the narrative having been interrupted by the Book of Leviticus. The story resumes with a census taken just a month after erection of the Tabernacle, only thirteen months since the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The book covers 39 years of the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness, but it focuses primarily on the beginning and end of that time period. During this time of harsh desert existence, Israel is transformed from a rag-tag band of ex-slaves and forged into a nation prepared to enter and conquer the Promised Land.

In the first parashah of Numbers, *Parashat B'midbar*, God commands Moses to take a tribe-by-tribe census of all of the Israelite males over the age of twenty. The census is taken, but the Levites are counted separately, and their total is not included in that (603,550) of the rest of the nation.<sup>2</sup>

Only a month ago, just before the building of the Tabernacle, God had commanded Moses to take a census of the Israelites. Little has changed since then. Why was a census conducted so soon after the previous one? Recall that when Jacob and his clan went down to Egypt, they numbered only 70 souls. After a while, the Israelites were reduced to slavery, and Pharaoh tried to limit their numbers by killing their newborns. Now, having left Egypt after centuries of hardship, they are some 600,000 strong. The census is testimony to God's power to fulfill God's promise to Abraham — that his descendants would be too numerous to count — no matter what the circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

Rashi, too, pondered this question. Rashi says that it is because of God's love for us that God counts us over and over. “Indeed, we too, count the things we love most. What we count tells us much about what we love.”<sup>4</sup>

Rashbam, Rashi's grandson, sees a more practical aspect to the census. The Israelites were preparing the military campaign to take the Promised Land, and men twenty years and older were eligible to go into battle. This census,

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, “Lift up the head....”

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 1:46-49.

<sup>3</sup> Commentary on *Parashat B'midbar* by The Reisha Rav, HaGoan Rav Aaron Levine.

<sup>4</sup> Commentary on *Parashat B'midbar* by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, Professor of Liturgy, Hebrew Union College.

then, was taken to determine the forces at Moses' disposal and organize them for battle.<sup>5</sup>

*Tif'k'du atem*, you shall count them. Why was an indirect method of counting the Israelites used? Earlier text alludes to a standing prohibition against counting the Israelites, either as a small group or as a whole people.<sup>6</sup> Originally the prohibition may have been related to a superstition that numbering a person also numbered (i.e., limited or defined) the person's days.<sup>7</sup>

Although this parashah does not specify the method by which an indirect count is to be taken, *Parashat Ki Tisa* does: "When you take a census of the Israelites ... every man shall give to Adonai an atonement for his soul ... half a shekel as a portion to Adonai. Everyone who passes through the census, from twenty years of age and up, shall give the portion to Adonai."<sup>8</sup> Because the phrase "*bif'kod otam*, when counting them," occurs twice in this passage, Or HaChaim<sup>9</sup> concluded that the prohibition against a direct headcount applied not just to Moses' census but for all time.<sup>10</sup>

It is notable that the Levites were not included in the general census. In fact, they appear wholly set apart. Not only does God tell Moses not to include them in the census of the tribes, but God does not designate a tribal chieftain for them as is done for the other tribes. And when they are counted in their own census, their numbers are far smaller than those of any one of the 12 tribes.<sup>11</sup>

Ibn Ezra<sup>12</sup> suggests that the Levites were excluded from the general census because, as keepers of the Tabernacle, they were exempt from military service. Their function was not to defend the camp or participate in the conquest of the land, but to guard the camp from human defilement.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "The Second Roll-Call of Israel," a commentary on *Parashat B'midbar* by Nehama Leibovitz.

<sup>6</sup> It is even forbidden to count the people for the purpose of a mitzvah. However, the ban is on counting whole bodies; a show of hands or fingers is permitted. – Harvey M. Brown, *Daf Hashavua*, United Synagogue, London.

<sup>7</sup> Fear traditionally inhibited Jews from counting, except with negative integers (e.g., "not one, not two..."). To be counted, says Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, is to be registered and, therefore, to be more visible and vulnerable.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 30:12-14.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Chaim ben Mosheh ben Atar, 1696-1743, known by the name of his most famous work, *Ohr HaChaim*.

<sup>10</sup> *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*; Edited by Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz; Mesorah Publications, Ltd.; 1993; p. 485.

<sup>11</sup> Commentary on *Parashat B'midbar* by Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor, Jewish Theological Seminary.

<sup>12</sup> Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), revered as one of the most important biblical commentators, developed rationalistic interpretations and often used his commentaries to defend the rabbinic oral tradition.

<sup>13</sup> Schorsch, *op. cit.*

During encampments, the Tabernacle was centrally located among the people, and the Levites surrounded it.<sup>14</sup> It was also the Levites who dismantled and transported the Tabernacle during the nation's travels.<sup>15</sup> Thus the spiritual protection afforded by the Levites mirrored the physical protection provided by the army. In deference to their elevated status, the Levites merited their own census.

Since this general census, unlike the previous one, listed “the names of every male, head by head,” a less practical but certainly nobler purpose of this census also comes to mind: restoring pride, dignity, and sense of self-worth to a band of ex-slaves. A slave's eyes are usually downcast in the presence of his master. *S'u et rosh*. Let them hold their heads high as a free people, especially in the presence of God.

God ordered this census, then, to show love and concern for the people and — by conferring honor and greatness on each one of them — to enhance their confidence and self-image. Not a single person was to be forgotten. A mass of oppressed slaves, who in Egypt had no individual worth whatever, were now to merit an individual count. Each person would have an opportunity to come before Moses and Aaron and be recognized as an individual of personal worth.<sup>16</sup> Everyone from that generation would then be thought of by his name and thus by his own unique, personal qualities<sup>17</sup>.

Census taking has a long history. In the United States, a census is taken every ten years. Taking a census in our Jewish communities helps us to quantify and characterize: who are the leaders, who are the active supporters, and who are the members in name only?

Who counts among *us*? How many of us are *not* counted because we have only tenuous connections to our Jewish communities? Let us lift up our heads and be counted. Jewish continuity depends on each of us being an active, responsible member of our Jewish community.

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<sup>14</sup> Numbers 1:50 and 1:53.

<sup>15</sup> Numbers 1:51.

<sup>16</sup> Commentary on *Parashat B'midbar* by Rabbi Leslie Bergson, Jewish Chaplain and Hillel Director, The Claremont Colleges.

<sup>17</sup> Commentary on *Parashat B'midbar* by Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, President, UAHC.