



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

The Parsha Discussion: Bamidbar- Why Count the Nation?

Parashat Bamidbar gives an exhaustive census of the Israelite nation in the wilderness, followed by the mapping of the wilderness encampment.

But what is the purpose of counting the nation? Why does God instruct Moses to take a census of the Children of Israel, and why at this historical juncture?

Please discuss:

- Why count the people of Israel in the wilderness? What is the purpose?
- Do they have a national census in your country? Is a national head-count a depersonalizing process or is it a procedure that actually acknowledges each and every citizen?

1. Rashbam suggests that the function is primarily of a **military nature**:

At this time, they need to journey to the Land of Israel, and the twenty-year-olds are of age will be drafted into the military. [They will leave Sinai] on the 20th of the 2nd month when the cloud rose (see 10:11), and there Moses says: We are travelling to the place which God has spoken of...(10:29) and thus, at the start of the second month (1:1) God issued a command to count them.

This military objective explains much of the language in chapter 1:

From **twenty years old and upward**, all in Israel who are **able to go to war**, you and Aaron shall list them, **battalion by battalion**. (1:3)

The specific stimulus for this national tally is the imminent advent of war; the military leadership must build their strategic plans on the basis of the size of the army, hence the need to count the nation.

2. A Spiritual Focus: When we open Chapter 2, we find a very different emphasis. The entire camp surrounds the Tabernacle.

The Israelites shall camp each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house; they shall camp **around the tent of Meeting** at a distance... When the **tent of meeting** shall set out with the camp of the Levites, it shall be **in the midst of the camps**; as they encamp, so shall they set out, each in position, standard by standard. (2:1,17)

A nation at war needs to concern itself with military tactics, but here, the focal interest would appear to be the centrality of the *Mishkan*, Tent of Meeting, and the concern that each tribe shall encamp and journey in a locus that expresses a relationship to the spiritual center. For this reason, Rashi asserts that the stimulus to this national census is in fact the completion of the *Mishkan*:

On the first of Nissan (1st calendrical month) the Mishkan was established, and on the first of Iyar (the 2nd month) he counted them. (1:1)

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch echoes this in his reading of the opening verse of Bamidbar:

The census was taken in the wilderness... The addition of the words, "Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting,"(1:1) indicates that this census was dedicated to the Torah; the Torah, given at Mount Sinai, with the Tent of Meeting being the place for accepting responsibility to follow its commandments.

But why should the establishment of a spiritual center for the nation necessitate a head-count? Here we encounter a third theme:

3. Names and ancestry:

... And in Bamidbar Rabbah I saw the following: ... by the number of the names... according to their head count". God said to him (Moses) to count them (the Jews) with honor and grandeur for each individual. Do not say to each household head, "How many are in your family? (or) How many sons do you have?". Rather, each one should pass in front of you **with reverence and honor** and you shall count them. This is what the verse says, by the number of the names, from the age of twenty years and up, according to their head count. (1:2) (Nachmanides to 1:3)

There is a sense – see 1:2 – that the count is being made to emphasize the lineage of each person. Sometimes, a national count can demean a person; an individual is turned into a number – but not here; here it is all “with reverence and honor” and each individual is fully recognized by his name and those of his ancestors.

The individual citizens do not form the national congregation directly and immediately. The all-comprising national collective consists of two concentric circles. The congregation is formed by tribes and every tribe by families.
(Hirsch 1:2)

This is far from a depersonalizing count; this census reminds each and every person of their family lineage and their tribal calling. If this count is about placing a spiritual focus upon the camp of Israel, then it performs this task by allowing each person to focus upon their individuality, their family legacy and their tribal mission.

So please discuss:

- Which reason do you think is stronger, the military or the spiritual explanation?
- One might say that certain verses perceive this count as secular and functional; other verses and commentators see it as spiritual and motivational. Looking at our nation today – at your community, or at Israel – which is more vital?
- Does your sense of your family and community stimulate you to a greater feeling of mission, to a higher calling?
- What sits at the center of your “camp”, community or your world? Is it your computer, your friends? School, synagogue, community? Is it important to have a spiritual “Center”?

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach!