

Torah Table Talk
Shedding Some “Light”
on Counting the Jewish People
Parshat Bemidbar
Numbers 1:1 – 4:20

Numbers 1:2

Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clan of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head.

The opening chapters of the Book of Numbers deals with two subjects: a census of the adult males in anticipation of Israel’s conquest of the land of Canaan and the layout of the camp of Israel in the wilderness. These two descriptions paint a picture of the community during their years of wandering in the wilderness. While the forty year sojourn had its high and lows, the community was always focused around the Ark of the Covenant and the Tent of Meeting. In this way, Israel was reminded that the focal point of its existence as a people and as individuals is covenant.

“Counting” plays a big part in Parshat Bemidbar. While God commands Moses to count the Jewish people, counting the nation is something that is only done sparingly and under special circumstances.

1. Why did God command Moses to number the Jewish people? According to Rashi, this is not the first time that Israel conducted a census: they were also counted when they left Egypt and following the sin of the golden calf. Why was it necessary to count them again?
2. The Hebrew expression for conducting a census is strange: “Siu et rosh,” literally means “lift up a head.” What is the connection between counting the people and this expression?
3. How were the people to be counted? What elements of their identity were considered in counting the people?

Babylonian Talmud Yoma 22b

Rabbi Isaac said: It is forbidden to count Israel even for the purpose of fulfilling a commandment, as it is written... “And Saul summoned the people and numbered them with telaim (sheep).” 1 Samuel 15:4

Rabbi Eleazer said: Whosoever counts Israel, transgresses a biblical prohibition as it said, “Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered.” (Hosea 2:1)

1. Why were the sages opposed to counting the Jewish people even for something of religious significance? What did counting the people represent to them?
2. How do you think they could reconcile this prohibition with the fact that Israel is repeatedly counted in the Torah and elsewhere in the Bible?
3. Note that both statements in the Talmud use biblical verses to prove the point which the sages wished to make. How do they use the verse? To what extent is the verse used according to its plain sense meaning or do the sages part from the plain sense meaning of the verse?

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It is customary to count people at a Minyan by reciting a verse in which there is ten words such as Psalms, 28:9 *Hoshea et amecha uvarech et nachalatecha ure'eym v'nasaym ad olam.* "Save your people, bless your heritage tend, elevate them forever." According to Rashi one can count by using *Va'ani b'rov hasdecha avo betecha eshtachaveh el aaychal kodshecha biyiratecha.* (Psalm 5:8) "And as for me, through your abundant kindness I will enter your holy sanctuary in awe of you."

1. Note that the transliterated words in the two verses quoted above number ten. What purpose does reciting a verse as a way of counting the ten for a Minyan serve?
2. Both of these verses are taken from the weekday liturgy. What does this practice tell you about our ancestor's familiarity with the prayer book?
3. How would you suggest we count people at the daily Minyan today? Here is an example: the Minyanaires at the Oceanside Jewish Center have taken to counting the Minyan with the first verse of the star spangled banner: "Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light." When the tenth person walks in someone will often say, "You're 'light!'"

Glossary

Sefer Ta'amei Haminhagim U'mikorei Hadinin – "The book of reasons and sources for customs and laws" A popular work which offers explanations for many different Jewish customs. It was written by Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Sperling.

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."