

Parshat Bamidbar 5776

Parshat Bamidbar begins with ה'’s commandment to משה and אהרן on the 1st of אייר, in the 2nd year since leaving מצרים to count the בני. This seems somewhat striking, since בני had been counted twice already that year, after יציאת מצרים and after the sin of the עגל הזהב. In fact, בני were and will be counted a total of 10 times, as detailed throughout תנ"ך, from the first count at the descent from מצרים to the final count in the times of משיח. רש"י explains that by counting us, ה' displays how much He treasures us, as a nation. Moreover, by counting us individually, ה' also showed how each person is significant. This, says the עקידת יצחק, is comparable to Hashem counting the stars as described in ויתתהילים, where each star has its place and individual worthⁱⁱⁱ.

However, this concept of identifying individuals by counting appears to be controversial in the view of a גמרא which expounds on the first פסוק of this week’s הפטרה. The phrase that בני will be as numerous as “*the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered*” is interpreted by the גמרא as being a double negative precept, forbidding both the measuring and counting of בני directly.

Nonetheless, counting בני via other means such as pot shards^{vi}, lambs^{vii} and half-shekalim^{viii} appears to have been more acceptable. The פסוק in תשא instructs that when a census is taken, it should not be by head-count, as this would result in a plague; rather each person should give a half-shekel and then the latter should be counted. Thus, in the time of אדוד המלך, a head-count of בני led to an outbreak of plague. The מפרשים question how דוד המלך could have been mistaken like this, and offer various solutions. רמב"ן posits that firstly, דוד המלך did not need to count the people at this point and secondly, he interpreted the above פסוק as applying in the מדבר only and not a command to future generations. Nevertheless, the רמב"ן is quick to point out the merit of דוד המלך, for his admission to ה' that he had erred in this regard. Another noteworthy idea is brought by the אור החיים, who explains that there are three circumstances where a count will not cause a plague:

- a) an unnecessary count, when commanded (by ה') to count, using half-shekalim;
- b) a necessary count, using something other than half shekalim (e.g. pot shards); or
- c) an unnecessary count, using half-shekalim as a כפרה.

The אור החיים explains that since דוד המלך was not commanded to count the people, and he did so without half-shekalim, there was no כפרה and so the plague struck.

What is this need for כפרה that is associated with counting individuals? The מלבי"ם brings three reasons by way of explanation:

- a) due to הרע – the drastic increase in the number of בני, from 70 to 603,550 between the descent to and the ascent from מצרים may have caused jealousy among the other nations;
- b) because ברכה only rests on that which is hidden from view, but once something is counted and thereby defined and made visible, the ברכה is removed;
- c) when people are united as one, their joint זכות is very great. However, once individuals are selectively distinguished, the deeds of each person become exposed and examined. Thus, bringing a half-shekel at this point was a way for the בני to indicate that despite being counted individually, they still remained a collective group, since a “half” is only a part of a greater “whole”.

Interestingly, looking at our פסוק in במדבר, the phrasing of the instruction to משה and אהרן appears to expressly contradict everything we have said above, by using the word “לגולגולת” - literally meaning “*by head count*”^{xiii}. While רש"י and other מפרשים explain that this must refer to counting by half-shekalim due to the inherent danger involved with counting people directly, the אברבנאל takes an opposing stance. He argues that in fact, here ה' was explicitly commanding a direct head-count, which is not problematic since those who are fulfilling a מצוה are protected from harm and הרע^{xiv}. He further contends that the inherent dangers involved in counting people directly occur only when a person counts of his own accord, and notes that the original count using half-shekalim was a means for collecting the necessary contributions for the components of משכן.

It is no coincidence that this פרשה is read on the שבת before שבועות. For 49 days, we have been counting upwards, striving to grow each day while building upon and being inspired by the previous days. Perhaps a message we can take from the above concepts of counting and growth is that as a people, there is strength both in our national unity and in our individuality. Accordingly, if we are able to understand our individual worth in the bigger picture, recognise our unique strengths and how we can use them within the community to realise our potential, we will have a warmer, stronger and more supportive foundation from which to develop and grow, both individually and as a community, in our relationship with ה' and with each other.

v תלמוד בבלי: יומא: כ"ב: ב' iv עקידת יצחק: ע"ב: מ"דⁱⁱⁱ תהילים: קכ"ז: ii במדבר רבה: ב' י"א i שמואל x שמות: ל' י"ב ix שמות: ל"ח: כ"ו viii שמואל א': ט"ו: ד' vii שמואל א': י"א: ח' vi השע: ב' א' תהילים: צ"א^{xiv} במדבר: א' ב' xiii שמות: ל' י"ב xii רמב"ן במדבר: א' ב' xi ב' י"ז

