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Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT BAMIDBAR

Of Census and Service
By Rav Chanoch Waxman

I

Sefer Bamidbar opens with the command to count the Children of Israel. Moshe is told by God:

Take a census (*se'u et rosh*) of the congregation of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their father's houses, the number of names, every male head by head. From twenty years and up, all that go out to assemble (*kol yotzei tzava*), you and Aharon shall number them according to their hosts (*le-tzivotam*). (1:2-3)

Following the basic what, who and by whom delineated in these opening verses, we are told that a representative of each tribe will accompany Moshe and Aharon in their task, and their names are duly recorded (1:4-15). The Torah then follows this up with three verses that seem to sum up the matter. We are informed that Moshe and Aharon inducted the tribal leaders they were instructed to involve in the census (1:17), that they gathered the community on the very day they had been instructed to do so (1:18) and that they counted the Children of Israel "as God commanded" (1:19).

Yet this is apparently not enough. In a deluge of highly repetitive detail, slightly out of synch with the Torah's normally laconic style, the text continues by giving us a very full account. Utilizing a formula that echoes the original phrase contained in the census instructions a full twelve times, the Torah informs us as to the exact numbers for each tribe "according to their families, according to their father's houses, the number of names, from twenty years and up, all that go out to assemble (*kol yotzei tzava*)" (1:20,22,24,26,28,30,32,34,36,38,40,42). Finally, the Torah rounds off the just completed twelve part accounting with four summary verses reminding us that the count was done by Moshe, Aharon and the tribal leaders, reminding us yet one more time of the criteria for being counted in the census, and giving us the final tally of 603,550 (1:44-47). All in all a grand total of forty-seven verses.

Strangely enough, despite all of the detail, something seems to be missing. While the Torah informs us as to the when, what, whom and how much, it never explicitly tells us the why. We are left wondering as to the meaning and purpose of the census and its data. Our understanding remains limited to the realm of quantity and never penetrates to the realm of quality. What in fact constitutes the purpose of the census?

A brief look back at *Sefer Shemot*, should help sharpen the problem. Counting has already cropped up as part of the preparation for the building of the Mishkan. *Parashat Ki Tisa* opens with instructions for taking a census.

When you take a census (*ki tisa et rosh*) of the Children of Israel recording their numbers each man should give atonement (*kofer*) to the Lord when they are counted, then there will be no plague when they are counted. This is what they shall give, each that is counted, half a shekel...an offering to God...And you shall take the atonement money (*kesef ha-kippurim*) of the Children of Israel and give it for the work of the Tent of Meeting... (*Shemot* 30:12-16)

While it is unclear whether this passage hints at a divine command to take a census as part of the process of constructing the Mishkan (Rashi, Ramban 30:12), undoubtedly a census took place shortly before the construction of the Mishkan. As pointed out by both the Rashbam and the Ramban (30:12), as part of the accounting of the materials used to construct the Mishkan, *Shemot* 38:25 informs us that the "silver of the census of the community (*kesef pikudei ha-eida*)" came to "1,000 talents and 1,775 shekels." This half a shekel per-person was put to use to cast the silver sockets of the sanctuary as well as for various hooks and bands attached to the posts of the Mishkan (38:27-28). A census certainly took place, and the proceeds were used for constructing the Mishkan.

But what is most interesting here is the math. As the Torah points out explicitly in *Shemot* 38:26, one 1,000 talents and 1,775 shekels at half a shekel per head represents the atonement money, the *machatzit ha-shekel* of 603,550 people: in other words, the exact same number reported as the sum of the desert census in *Bamidbar* 1:46. This seems surprising at the very least.

Understanding the dating should bring the problem into focus. As noted above, the first census, what might be termed the "Mishkan census," constitutes part of the preparations for the building of the Mishkan. Consequently, it took place some time before the first day of the **first** month of the second year in the desert, the date given by the Torah for the completion of the Mishkan (*Shemot* 40:1). The second census, the story of chapter 1 of *Bamidbar*, what we above termed the "desert census," occurs not long thereafter, as the Torah tells us repeatedly, "On the first day of the **second** month of the second year" (1:1,18). As such, the results of the desert census seem downright miraculous. As both Rashi and the Ramban (*Shemot* 30:12,16) point out, it seems nearly impossible that deaths and birthdays would not affect the total numbers over the course of time. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, however one explains the identity of the two census results, the very occurrence of the second census seems wholly unnecessary. The Children of Israel had already been counted just a short time previously. They are more or less a known quantity, 603,550 or so. What could possibly constitute the need for another census, one in fact which yields no more than an already known number? If so, once again, what constitutes the inner and non-numerical purpose of the desert census?

II

While helping us to formulate the problem, the timing of the census may also be the key to understanding its purpose. As stressed above, the desert census takes

place on the first day of the second month, what we would nowadays term the first of Iyar. But rather shortly afterwards, on the twentieth day of the second month, the twentieth of Iyar, the Children of Israel broke camp and began their journey to the Land of Israel. As Bamidbar 10:11-12 reports:

And it was on the twentieth day of the second month in the second year, the cloud rose from the Mishkan. And the Children of Israel began their journey from the Wilderness of Sinai...

But of course, this journey was meant to be far shorter than forty years. It is for no reason that Moshe will soon state to his in-law Chovav, when inviting him to join the Children of Israel in their journey, that we are "traveling to the place" which God has promised (10:29). As *Devarim* 1:2 teaches us, the distance from Sinai to Arvot Moav, the eastern side of the Jordan, is only about eleven days long. The journey to Israel should have taken a short time. Entry into the Land of Israel is imminent, not an elusive goal in the far distant future. Apparently, if not for the people's series of complaints and the tragic events surrounding the sending of the spies, the Children of Israel would have entered the land quite promptly, around the first of Sivan, approximately a month after the desert census.

However, entering the land entails conquering the land, and conquering the land requires an army. Consequently, the Rashbam (1:2) interprets the census as a matter of military preparation. The census fundamentally constitutes a draft and an organization of the able bodied for war. According to the Rashbam, the term, "*kol yotzei tzava*," used repeatedly by the Torah to define the criteria of the census, should be understood in its modern usage, as those who "go out to war," or more colloquially as those capable of bearing arms.

This interpretation may be supported by a brief look at the story found in II Shemuel of the census conducted by King David. King David demands of Yoav, his commanding general, and the other "*sarei ha-chayil*," officers of the army, that they conduct a census of the people (24:2-4). Apparently, a census constitutes a military matter, conducted by military leaders for military purposes.

In this light, we no longer need to wonder about the need for the desert census and the numbers problem raised earlier. The census is not really about the numbers. The numbers are already more or less known. Rather it is about organizing for war, part of the normal way of preparing for battle and a necessary part of the process of preparing for entering the land.

III

While the Rashbam's interpretation may appear attractive at first glance, on further analysis it faces both conceptual and linguistic challenges. Let us take a look at the other time and place in *Sefer Bamidbar* that a census takes place.

At Arvot Moav, shortly after their encounter with the daughters of Moav, the ensuing plague and the rise to prominence of Pinchas (25:1-18), the Children of Israel are once again counted. In a striking echo of the opening of the *sefer*, God commands Moshe to:

Take a census (*se'u et rosh*) of the congregation of the Children of Israel, from twenty years and up, according to their father's houses, all that go out to assemble (*kol yotzei tzava*) in Israel (26:2)

The fourfold linguistic and thematic parallel of 1) the command to take a census, (1:2, 26:2), 2) the criteria of twenty years and above (1:3, 26:2), 3) the numbering in accord with their father's houses (1:2, 26:2), and 4) the term and concept of *kol yotzei tzava* (1:3, 26:2), creates an obvious connection between the desert census found in chapter 1 and what might be termed the "Arvot Moav census," found in chapter 6. Moreover, the Torah makes this connection explicit in citing Moshe and Elazar's passing on of the census instructions. The census of Arvot Moav is to be carried out "as commanded to Moshe and the Children of Israel upon their exit from Egypt" (26:4).

Yet, here there exists no ambiguity as to the purpose of the census. The story of the census (26:1-56) closes with the command to divide the land amongst those just counted (26:53). Those families greater in number will receive a larger portion, and those whose numbers are fewer shall receive a smaller portion (26:54). The Tribe of Levi, which is not destined to receive a portion of the Land of Israel, is counted separately (26:57-62), and the rationale of their not receiving an inheritance of land is duly noted (26:62).

But here we come to the nub of the matter. As of the fortieth year, the Children of Israel stand on the cusp of entering the land. If, as the Rashbam maintains, entering the land entails conquering the land, and conquering the land requires a military census, the Arvot Moav census seems to be the perfect time for a military count. No more delays will ensue, and come what may, the Children of Israel will soon cross the Jordan into the Land of Israel. Yet no military census takes place. Apparently, the process of entering and conquering the land does not demand a military census. If so, it seems strange to interpret the desert census as a purely military matter.

A broader glance at the latter part of *Sefer Bamidbar* should strengthen this point. Throughout the latter part of *Parashat Chukat*, the Children of Israel engage in numerous battles, ranging from the encounters with Edom (20:14-21) and the Canaani (21:1-3) to the wars against Sichon the King of the Emori and Og the King of Bashan (21:21-35). In none of these cases is the battle preceded by a military census or any particular type of organization and mobilization.

On some level, as the Torah often points out, military success is not a product of strength of arms or impeccable organization. Rather, as in Moshe's words to the Children of Israel success stems from the fact that "...the Lord your God goes before you and shall fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt..." (*Devarim* 1:30). But if the actual conquering of the land does not involve a military census and it is in fact by virtue of God's hand that the land is conquered, why should the still born process of entering the land begun at the beginning *Parashat Bamidbar* involve a military census?

In addition to the thematic difficulties inherent in the military reading, the military interpretation appears vulnerable and even unnecessary on the linguistic

plane. As the Ramban (1:3) points out, the term *tzava*, based upon the stem *tz.v.a.*, often appears in a non-military context. For example, the second command to count the respective subgroups of Levites and assign them their respective labors in the sanctuary is formulated as a command to count "all that come to *tzava* to work in the Tent of Meeting" (4:3). While this particular citation is taken from the case of the selection of the Kehatites, similar formulations occur in the selection of the Gershonites (4:23), the Merrarites (4:30), and the summary verses of the story (4:35,38,43).

Similarly, in concluding the story of the induction of the Levites (8:24-25) the Torah informs us that from the age of twenty five-Levites shall come "*litzvo tzava* for work in the Tent of Meeting"(8:24). In both these cases, the term "*tzava*," seems to lack any military connotation. Divine service is not battle. Moreover, the Torah even utilizes the term in contexts wholly removed from any context of mobilization, service and the like. *Shemot* 38:8 informs us that the lather was fashioned from the mirrors of the "gathering women who gathered" at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. The original text contains a double usage of the stem *tz.v.a.*, and reads as "*mar'ot ha-tzov'ot asher tzavu.*"

Quite clearly, as the Ramban maintains, and as translated here, the term should be understood as referring to assembly. Assembly can sometimes be for martial purposes. Yet the term itself does not carry any particular military connotation. Assembly is sometimes for work, sometimes for battle and sometimes for no particular reason at all. But if so, the term "*kol yotzei tzava*," the criterion of who is counted, no longer necessitates a military interpretation of the census. In sum, nothing about the act of counting itself, the context of the desert census, or the terminology utilized by the Torah confirms the military thesis.

IV

Despite the sustained attack until this point upon the necessity and accuracy of interpreting the desert census as part and parcel of preparing for battle, the military interpretation does seem to grasp something crucial occurring in the text.

Even a cursory reading of the beginning of *Bamidbar* should leave us with a sense of sustained organization. Each member of Israel is counted and recognized as a member of a particular family and tribe (1:1-46). Each member of Israel is then placed in a particular group and arranged in a particular spatial arrangement regarding the Mishkan (2:1-34). However, there is more to it than just organization. A systematic comparison and contrast between the Levites and the other tribes of Israel drawn throughout the beginning of *Bamidbar* should help us realize that some sort of mobilization, of preparation for service, is also in process.

While chapters 1 and 2 deal, respectively, with the Israelite census and the organization of the Israelite camp, chapter 3 contains an account of the Levites' numbers and camping arrangements (3:14-39). Here, in the case of the Levites, the numeric and spatial information is always accompanied by a definition of function, a description of the service performed by a particular subgroup of Levites.

For example, in the case of the Gershonites, the senior line of Levites, the Torah teaches us their number (3:22) and that they encamped on the western side of the sanctuary (3:22). However, immediately following this information we are taught part of the duties of these Levites: "...the tabernacle, the tent, its covering, the screen for the entrance to the Tent of Meeting...all the service connected with these" (3:25-26).

Similarly, the second counting of the Levites, reported in chapter 5, forges an even closer connection between numbering and function. The counting opens with the standard command to take a census (*naso et rosh*), in this case of the Kehatites. As briefly mentioned above, in standard fashion the Torah then delineates the criterion of the counting, who is to be counted: "All that come to assemble (*la-tzava*) for work in the tent of meeting" (4:3). But immediately afterwards the Torah treats us to a lengthy discourse upon the details of the labor of the Kehatites, the rules and means for transporting the holy vessels of the sanctuary (4:4-20).

The point should be clear. In the case of the Levites, the second and third numberings recounted in *Parashat Bamidbar*, counting comes hand in hand with both placement and function. Counting constitutes induction, a mobilization for divine service. In parallel, so too the first numbering in *Parashat Bamidbar*, the desert census, comes hand in hand with placement. But if so, by virtue of parallel, the counting and placement of the Israelites should serve a functional purpose. It should comprise some sort of preparation for divine service.

This point can also be grasped through a particular linguistic connection and through the method of contrast. In closing out the account of the desert census (1:1-46), the Torah notes that "the Levites were not numbered (*hatpakdu*)" (1:47) along with the Israelites. Immediately following this verse, the Torah reports God's command to Moshe not to include the Levites in the general census, and along the way reveals the rationale for the separate numbering of the Levites.

But do not number (*tifkod*) the Tribe of Levi, nor take a census of them (*tisa*) along with the Children of Israel. But you shall appoint (*hafked*) the Levites over the Tabernacle and over all its vessels...they shall bear (*yisu*) the Tabernacle and all its vessels and they shall minister to it...(1:48-50)

To phrase this logically, the Levites are not included in the Israelite census because they play a different social role; they perform a different function: that of guardians and bearers of the Mishkan. As such, at the very least the Levites should be treated as an elite group. But this is not all. Along the way to making this point, the Torah plays a subtle word game, utilizing the stem p.k.d to connote both numbering as in *tifkod*, and appointment, function or service as in *hafked*. In doing so, the Torah integrates these two concepts and once again emphasizes that counting constitutes an act of induction into a particular functional role and divine service.

More surprisingly, the Torah creates another meaning pair, utilizing the stem n.s.a to connote both counting as in *tisa* and lifting, elevating, carrying or bearing as in *yisu*. But once again this is more than just a word game. On the conceptual plane, the Levites will be numbered (3:14-39, 4:1-5:49) in order to bear a burden. They are counted, or perhaps in a deeper sense "elevated," in order to fulfill a particular

function, a particular divine service. Alternatively, perhaps the reverse is correct. Perhaps the very act of carrying the Mishkan, of bearing the burden of their duty, is what elevates the Levites, what makes them count.

Either way, in light of these meaning matrixes, we understand why the Levites are not counted amongst Israelites. But we do not understand why the Israelites are counted at all. While the Torah refers frequently to the *pekudim*, the numbering/induction into function of the Israelites (1:44-46), we do not know what constitutes their unique function and service. While the Torah commands the counting – *se'u et rosh* (1:2) of the Israelites—we remain unaware of what burden they carry, what task they bear, and for what purpose they are elevated.

V

Tracking the structure of the first two chapters of *Bamidbar* should provide us with the key for resolving the puzzle. The following table should be helpful for our analysis.

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Section 1: 1:1-19 | Command to Moshe and precise instructions, mention of "as God commanded" |
| Section 2: 1:20-47 | The sums for each tribe, no mention of "as God commanded" |
| Section 3: 1:48-54 | Exclusion of Levites, discussion of camping arrangements, phrase "as God commanded" |
| Section 4: 2:1-31 | Arrangement of standards, travel arrangements, numbers and imagery of chapter 1 |
| Section 5: 2:32-34 | Final summation, final tally, camping and travel arrangements, double usage of "as God commanded" |

As mapped out above, the book begins with the command to count the Children of Israel, the precise instructions to Moshe, and the conclusion, given prospectively, that Moshe carried out his task exactly "as God commanded" (1:1-19). This is followed by the actual tally of each tribe and the summary verses described earlier, including the total tally and the fact that the Levites were not included in the general census (1:20-47). Interestingly enough, this section, the apparent summary of the unit does not conclude with the statement that Moshe did "as God commanded."

At this point, in what might be termed section three (1:48-54), we are informed of the rationale as to why the Levites are numbered separately, their duty as porters and guards of the Mishkan (1:48-51), their camping arrangements and the camping arrangements of the general population of Israel (1:52-53). In addition, and

quite surprisingly, the Torah now chooses to teach us that the Children of Israel did "as God commanded" (1:54). Apparently, counting itself does not count the telos of counting and cannot be said to be an accomplishment of the divine command and purpose. Rather it is the arrangement of the camp and the placements of the Levites and Israelites that can be termed "as God commanded."

Integrating chapter 2 into the above structure should further strengthen the point. As alluded earlier, the bulk of chapter 2, section four the chart above (2:1-31), dedicates itself to describing the arrangement of the camp into four groups or standards, the "*degalim*." Each standard consists of three tribes encamped respectively on either the east, south, west or north of the Mishkan. While thematically, the chapter is primarily concerned with the grouping, camping and travel arrangements (2:17), the Torah's recounting includes the exact tally of each particular tribe found in section two (1:20-47). These numbers appear as part of a formula consisting of: 1) the name of the heads of tribe mentioned in section one (1:1-19), 2) the phrase "and its assembly and number" (*u-tzva'o u-pekudav/deihem*) and 3) the precise number. As such, the story of the "*degalim*" the story of chapter 2, integrates the key information and terms of chapter 1.

This connection between the arrangement of the camp, traveling, and numbering reaches its crescendo in section five, the latter part of chapter 2. The Torah sums up with the following:

These are the numbers of the Children of Israel by the houses of their fathers, 603,550...And the Children of Israel did all as God commanded Moshe, so they camped according to their standards, and so they traveled...(2:32-34)

The Torah recounts the final number, the sum of chapter 1 and conjoins it with the fulfillment of the command of God, the camping and traveling in standards - in other words, the organization of the camp and travel arrangements that constitutes the true purpose of the counting. Only at this point, section five, at the terminus of chapter two can the counting be said to be complete, the purpose achieved and the divine command fully carried out.

To put this all together, camping and traveling in accord with the *degalim* constitutes the function of the Israelites. The very social and political order embodied in the *degalim* organization constitutes the telos of the counting. The Children of Israel are inducted into formations for camping and traveling. They are mobilized for the journey to Israel itself. This is the burden they bear and the divine service they are inducted into. But this still requires some elaboration.

VI

While there are many ways to close the circle, let us return to the comparison between the Israelites and Levites discussed earlier, the origin of the conceptual pair of counting and divine service.

Throughout its discussion of the unique status and role of the Levites, the Torah utilizes the term *mishmeret*, translated as either guard, charge or task. The Levites encamp directly around the Mishkan in order to keep the "*mishmeret*" of the

Mishkan (1:53). Similarly, the first designation of the Levites involves their "keeping the *mishmeret*...to do the service of the Mishkan" (3:8). Finally, the counting of each subgroup of Levites culminates in the assignment of a particular area of responsibility in the Mishkan, introduced once again by the term *mishmeret*, (3:25, 31, 36). But interestingly enough, this term also appears to modify the Children of Israel.

Shortly before the actual commencing of the Children of Israel's journey, the Torah describes the signal system by which the Israelites knew whether to journey or encamp.

And when the cloud rose from the Mishkan, then the Children of Israel journeyed, and in the place where the cloud rested there the Children of Israel encamped. According to the word of God the Israelites journeyed and according to the word of God they encamped, all the days that the cloud rested upon the Mishkan. And when the cloud tarried long on the Mishkan many days, then the Children of Israel kept the charge (*mishmeret*) of God and did not journey. (9:17-19)

On the simplest level, the very act of participating in the journey, of being part of the entity of Israel journeying to the Land of Israel constitutes a divine charge and service. God had promised the forefathers to bring their descendants to the land. In revealing himself to Moshe, God culminates his promise of redemption with the claim that "I will bring you (*ve-haivaiti etchem*) to the land" (*Shemot* 6:8). Participating in the journey helps realize the divine promise, constitutes a partnership with the divine, and comprises a kind of divine service.

But this is not such a simple job. Traveling through the desert is no small task. Away from the secure and familiar environs of Sinai, the Children of Israel will face the vast and frightening emptiness of the desert. As Moshe describes it through the looking glass of forty years hindsight: "That great and terrible wilderness" (*Devarim* 1:19). It requires fortitude and courage.

Moreover, as the Torah describes in the continuation of the passage cited above, sometimes the cloud would rest upon the Mishkan for a few days, sometimes for many, and sometimes for but a single evening. As the Ramban (9:19) points out, sometimes the people may have desired to move on, sometimes to stay put for a bit longer. But no matter what, "According to the word of God they encamped and according to the word of God they traveled."

Emphasizing this point, the Torah reiterates this formula three times, at the opening of the passage (9:18), midway through (9:20) and upon its conclusion (9:23). Come what may, the Children of Israel followed after God with faith through the awful desert and awaited his signals to travel or rest. As the passage concludes:

...the charge (*mishmeret*) of God they kept, according to the word of God given to Moshe. (9:23)

While the Levites may serve in the Mishkan, the house of God, and bear the burden of their duty, the Israelites serve in a different sense. They comprise the community of Israel, destined to fulfill the divine promise. They faithfully follow God's commands

and signals, journeying to their destiny and the Land of Israel. A truly noble divine service. It is for this service that they are numbered and mobilized at the beginning of *Bamidbar*.

VII

Finally, before closing we should note that interpreting the counting as a mobilization for travel to the Land of Israel provides an interesting perspective on the structure of *Sefer Bamidbar*. Interpreting the counting as part of imminent entrance to the Land of Israel, as preparation for conquest or even the post-conquest division of the land, emphasizes the theme of tragedy. A story that begins with great optimism, buoyant with hope for immediate entry into the land, collapses quickly into the complaining of the people, the sin of the spies and forty years wandering in the desert. *Sefer Bamidbar*, known in rabbinic literature as *Sefer Ha-Pikudim*, the Book of Numbers, foreshadows its tragic fate from its very start. Its very name carries hints at its lost destiny and the failure of the generation of the desert.

While we cannot dispute the tragic quality of the book and the collapse of the journey shortly after its start, the counting, numbers and the name *Sefer Ha-Pikudim* carry a different and certainly not tragic conceptual connotation. They serve to remind us that the book is really about the journey from Egypt to Israel and about transition. It is about the faith of Israel in God during the forty-years-long journey. It is in the final analysis about the mobilization of a people and their transformation into a group that follows after God and is capable of possessing the land for themselves and their children. In the end of the day, the beginning of *Bamidbar* as *Sefer Pikudim* should remind us of the words of Yirmiyahu:

So says the Lord, I remember the kindness and devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, when you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown
(*Yirmiyahu 2:2*)

FURTHER STUDY

- 1) See Rashi 1:1. Look at *Shemot* 12:37. Try to note an internal difficulty in Rashi's claim. See the first part of the Ramban 1:45. Contrast Rashi and the Ramban with the two theories mentioned in the *shiur* explaining the need for counting.
- 2) Read Ramban 1:1. Now see *Bereishit* 21:1 and *Shemot* 32:34. How does the Ramban's interpretation relate to the theory presented in the *shiur*.
- 3) See Rashi *Shemot* 30:16 and Ramban *Shemot* 30:12. Evaluate their solutions. Try to think of some lesson, theological or otherwise taught by the identity of number.
- 4) Read the Introduction of Netziv's *Emek Davar* to *Bamidbar*. Compare his theory regarding the name *Sefer Ha-Pekudim*, with the theory outlined in the *shiur* above.