

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Bamidbar
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Bamidbar – Making it count

This week’s Parasha of Bamidbar begins with a description of one of the censuses that were taken of Bnei Yisrael. Hashem commanded Moshe to count all of the men over the age of 20, those old enough to join the army and go out to war.

Ordinarily, it is forbidden to count Jewish people. Therefore, if we want to know the number of people present, we need to adopt a trick to make the census permissible. In the census in our Parasha, half shekel coins were used. Each person would donate a half shekel and the coins were counted. Later, in the time of King Shaul, a census was conducted with the aid of pottery shards. King Shaul conducted a second census via sheep – each person took a sheep from the Royal flock and they counted the sheep. In the times of the Bet HaMikdash when they had to count Kohanim in order to conduct lotteries to determine who would merit to perform the Divine service, fingers were counted instead of people to avoid this prohibition.¹

A question arises. Surely counting fingers/shekels/sheep instead of the person itself is simply a legalistic loophole. If it is forbidden to count Jewish people, how can it be permissible to count their coins or sheep or fingers instead? The answer can be explained by means of a parable. After various wars there is often a problem of undetonated land mines. Imagine a large field that is filled with such landmines and no-one knows where they are located. Large fences and signs are installed to warn people of the danger. It is forbidden to traverse the field. But if someone had a map of precisely where the landmines are located, they could carefully cross the field in safety. Would that be cheating the system? Of course not! There is no problem with getting to the other side of the field. The only problem is stepping on a landmine. People are allowed to cross the field, as long as they don’t step on landmines along the way. Similarly, we are entitled to know the total number of Jewish people at any given time; we are simply prohibited from assigning a number to each person. If we can somehow calculate the number of people without counting them then this would be permissible. (Note however, as we will see below, even calculating the number of people in a permissible way should be limited to times of necessity, such as making sure we have a minyan for tefillot.)

Only Hashem knows the true reason why it is prohibited to assign a number to each person. However, one reason that has been suggested is that treating someone as a number is dehumanising. Each number assigned to each person is arbitrary, we could just have easily assigned that number to someone else and it would not have affected the overall count. By referring to a person as an arbitrary number, we are negating the fact that each person has a neshama and is unique and a world unto themselves.

We don’t have to look too far back into our history to see the devastating effect of people being called by a number.² Many years ago I was on a stopover in Athens during a flight between Israel and Australia. While waiting for the next flight, I found myself sitting at a table with an elderly Jewish lady and a young German backpacker. The German innocently inquired about the numbers that were tattooed on the old lady’s arm. The lady calmly replied that it was a memento from the war. She later confided in me her shock at the question (understandably!), particularly given the nationality of the questioner. I marvelled at this lady’s even-temperedness. If I was in her position, I probably would have responded sarcastically “Ask your grandfather! He might have been the one who gave them to me!”

¹ See Gemara, masechet Yoma Daf 22b which discusses each of these cases.

² I mentioned this anecdote a number of years ago in Darchai Noam but I think it is worth repeating.

The Gemara³ compares and contrasts the reigns of Shaul and David. As mentioned above, Shaul HaMelech counted his army in a proper fashion and for a proper purpose – he needed to plan a war. David on the other hand counted the Jewish people in an improper fashion and he was punished for that. Apparently, David HaMelech ordered that the people be counted directly, without the use of a coin or some other item. How could David HaMelech make such a simple mistake when the halacha is so clear?⁴ The Tanach⁵ explains that there was more going on under the surface - David was actually incited by the Satan into erring as a punishment for some other sin⁶.

However, in discussing this event, the Ramban⁷ cannot accept that King David made such a fundamental error by counting Jewish people directly. He suggests that David did use coins when conducting his census, but his sin lay in another area. The Ramban brings a few possible explanations, one of which is the suggestion that David sinned by counting the Jewish people unnecessarily. He wasn't going out to war but only sought to gladden his heart in the knowledge that he ruled over such a large nation. We can learn from here that a census should only be done for a proper purpose. We should put our faith in Hashem and not in numbers.

Some people believe that counting can generate an “evil eye”. There are a number of different explanations for this enigmatic concept, ranging from the mystical (if someone receives an “evil eye” it can cause them to suffer) to the more rationalistic (it's not nice to show off and cause others to feel jealous). If we flaunt our wealth, our strength or our numbers, we can cause other people to feel pain. As well as showing a lack of sensitivity to those who may have less, it may be placing a stumbling block before others by causing them to commit the sin of being jealous. Some are so careful of this concept that they will not even mention the number of children they have. There is actually a halachic source for this idea. The Shulchan Aruch rules that we can only pray for material blessing before we count our stock, because bracha can only rest on that which is hidden from the eye.⁸ All of this talk of the evil eye reminds me of an old joke:

During a trial in court, the non-Jewish judge asked the elderly witness: “Mr Levy, how old are you?” Mr Levy replied: “knayna hora⁹ 83”. “Mr Levy, please just answer the question directly, how old are you?” “knayna hora 83.” After this continued a number of times the judge became exasperated. One of the Jewish lawyers offered to help. He said: “Mr Levy, how old are you knayna hora”? And Mr Levy answered “83”!

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that one of the reasons suggested for the prohibition of counting people is so as to avoid becoming overly proud of the number of people in our lives. We should put our faith in Hashem not, in numbers.
2. One of the explanations for why Ayin Hara works is that we shouldn't show off our possessions and thereby make other people feel pain. Hashem wants us to be sensitive to other people's feelings and if not, we may arouse Divine judgement. If that is how we act with our possessions then perhaps we don't really deserve to have them!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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³ Yoma Daf 14b.

⁴ Some commentators have suggested that for some reason David understood that the prohibition of counting the Jewish people directly only applied in the time of Moshe.

⁵ See Divrai Hayamim Aleph (21:1) and the Radak's commentary.

⁶ The Midrash suggests that Hashem was angry that the Jewish people were not sufficiently troubled by the fact that the Bet HaMikdash was not yet built.

⁷ See the Ramban's commentary to our Parasha.

⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 230:2.

⁹ When pronounced clearly and correctly, the phrase is “Kein Ayin Hora” which is Yiddish for “there should be no evil eye.” The Hebrew equivalent is “bli ayin hara”.