

MORASHAH
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 811 Palisade Ave., Teaneck, NJ 07666
www.utj.org 201.801.0707

Rabbi David Willig

Parashat HaShavuah Series

**Numbers, Numbers, and more Numbers:
 Do They All Add Up?**

Sometimes it seems for every number in this Parasha, there is a question. Let me begin with a few.

First, why was it important for the Torah to tell us where the census took place? Why must we know that it was in the desert? (This is the true name both of this Parasha and of the entire book. It is only in English that the name of the Parasha and the Sefer is "Numbers". In the original, the name is B'midbar, "in (the Sinai) Desert".) So why is the location of the census important?

Second, the Torah tells us that the census should be "according to the number of names" (*bemispar sheimot*). The census was taken for military purposes, i.e., everyone who can fight. The numbers are what seem to be important. Why are the names important.?

Third, why a census now? There was just a census taken about six months ago. Remember, In Shemot we had Parashat Ki Tissa, (Exodus 30:12-13), where everyone contributed the half shekel, which when added up, would serve to provide a count of the male population. If we turn to Exodus 38:26, we see the population was 603,550. This census was taken, according to the Rabbis, immediately following Yom Kippur of the first year. What need is there for a second census that was taken on the "first day of the second month of the second year"?

And fourth, even though the two counts were only seven months apart, some people would turn 20, some would die. The odds against these numbers being exactly the same are infinitesimal. Yet the census in Exodus and the census in Numbers have the same total: 603,550.

Rashi and the Ramban both ask this question and give different answers. Rashi says that a person's age is counted as of Rosh Hashanah, and since this second census was in the same calendar year as the first, no one's age changed (since no Rosh Hashanah took place) and since the total is the same, it must be that no one died. The Ramban had his own answer, but the fundamental question, of two different counts, seven months apart being exactly the same, seems rather perplexing. And again, especially since the count was exactly the same, why does God proclaim the need for a second census?

To this question, Professor M.D. Cassuto posits an interesting answer (commentary to Exodus 38:25). Cassuto brings evidence from ancient Mesopotamian documents that a census was not a one-day affair, but took a lengthy period of time. This makes a great

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deal of sense, because even today, with all our computers and Internet, the census is still a long, drawn-out affair, which takes many months to arrange, many months to count and many months to squabble over. So, according to Cassuto, this was not a second census. There was only one census and this is it. The first step of the census process was to contribute the half shekel. This gave the raw count. Then came the real work, getting each person's name, his father's name, his tribe. Those who turned 20 in these months were not counted. Those who died remained in the count. This was one census, and that is why the numbers remained the same.

This brings us to question two: why was it important to have the names of each individual? Why is the breakdown by tribe not sufficient? To this I'd like to offer a very simple answer. How many of us like to be addressed as "Hey, you"? Every society that tries to dehumanize people takes away their names. A culture that recognizes the importance of the individual, recognizes each person by name. Can you imagine the supervisors of Egypt calling out a name? Or would everyone be addressed by the generic name "slave"? As this census was designed to prepare for military service, which is by nature a dehumanizing experience, it is all the more important that we remember that our soldiers are more than numbers, more than a cog in a machine. Each one is a human being, an individual, and has infinite worth.

Finally, to answer the first question (why is it important that we understand that this census took place in the desert?), we must turn to the Haftarah, from the book of Hoshea. The Haftarah is so beautiful that it deserves its own Dvar Torah, but I will point out only two things. The Portion of B'midbar deals, as we said, with a counting. The Prophet Hoshea sees a time when no counting of the Jewish People will be possible, as they will be "like the sands on the seashore that cannot be counted, as their numbers are too large." How is this to happen, as Israel has been unfaithful. Israel has not kept its covenant with God? Hoshea in chapter 2, verse 16 says that God will "take her (Israel) out to the desert and talk to her heart." God talks to us every day. Not the way that George Burns spoke to John Denver, or Morgan Freeman spoke to Jim Carey, but softly. We have to listen in order to hear.

In our everyday lives, we are too busy to listen, too distracted to hear. We need to be free of the distractions of the every day to truly hear the word of God. So God tells us that after the Exodus, it was in the desert that we were able to hear Him, and God is promising us that someday He will repeat that desert experience again, so that we can truly make God a part of our lives.

The Haftarah concludes with the words that we recite when putting on tefillin. God is saying to the Jewish People; "I will betroth you forever. I will betroth you in righteousness, justice, mercy and kindness. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will truly know God."

May each one of us strive to hear the word of God, to bring God into our lives so that we can truly know Him and love Him.

Shabbat Shalom!

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