

Who Counts? - Parashat Naso

My three and a half year old niece, Kendall, is very into collecting things these days. She loves to take all the pretend food from her mini-kitchen and line it up neatly across the living room rug, to take all the different pairs of shoes from her closet and set them out on her bedroom floor, to take all the stuffed animals from their various locations and put them on her bed where she can see them together in one place. When Kendall's father – my brother, Scott – was younger, he loved to collect baseball cards which he would meticulously catalog and count and trade with friends; I was more into stickers, particularly the colorful Lisa Franks and pungent scratch-and-sniffs which I would carefully place into photo albums and page through for hours. There is something enormously satisfying for a collector about looking at and handling her wares. We like to keep a close eye on those things most precious to us.

A number of midrashim (rabbinic stories) see God as the Grand Collector on High, particularly when it comes to God's relationship with us, the Jewish people. These midrashim explain that the great many population counts that we see throughout the Bible, including in this morning's Torah portion, *Parashat Naso*, derive from God's love for God's creatures, comparing God to a person with a cache of precious jewels that he would frequently take out and count to take pleasure in their beauty and be reassured that they were all safely in place. While the plain meaning of the various countings of the Jewish people throughout Torah is that they are for the purpose of assessing military might, focused entirely on males age 20 and up and tallying separately the Levites who do not bear arms, the rabbis cannot help but see a deeper, more spiritual meaning to these censuses, particularly since they are taken so very often. As the great medieval commentator Rashi writes, "Because of God's love for them, God is continually counting..." (Rashi on Numbers 1:1). God wants to make sure we are all present and accounted for and to take pleasure in our very being.

Those of us familiar with Jewish folk traditions might be a bit surprised to hear of all the positive associations with counting just mentioned, given that they tend to fly in the face of a group of prevailing superstitions that Jews often have when it comes to numbering, and especially when it comes to numbering people. Some of us will know that when we tally up individuals for a minyan, trying to determine whether we've reached the requisite quorum of ten, we will count not with numbers but rather with a 10-word Biblical verse or by silently using our 10 fingers, or even, strangely enough, by, saying NOT one, NOT two, etc. These practices are said to derive from the Book of Exodus, which seems to suggest that taking a census is a dangerous thing, a payment required from each person at the time he or she is counted in order to avert catastrophe. As we read, "When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each must give to God a ransom for his life, at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them" (Exodus 30:11-12). More popularly, some will say that counting courts the *ayin hara* – the evil eye – in that it becomes almost a display of hubris, the counter taking such pride in her number of grand-children, for example, that it ultimately attracts bad luck. For all the beautiful imagery of God tenderly numbering our people, it also seems that there is something unseemly, and perhaps even unsafe, about counting. How are we to reconcile these two different approaches? And why should counting be seen as a good or bad thing in the first place?

Lord Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of the UK, has an interesting interpretation as to Judaism's somewhat ambivalent relationship with tallying people. He explains that in ancient times, and to some extent still today, number was a proxy not just for population but for strength, power, and wealth. Larger communities could muster great armies and build great monuments (through manual labor) and produce great prosperity (through taxation) in a way that less populous nations simply could not. It's no wonder that Pharaoh became so worried, then, at the beginning of the Book of Exodus, when the

Israelites suddenly become *rav v'atzum* – very, very numerous. There is no telling what a massive people might do!

Against this idea of life measured by bulk, explains Sacks, came Judaism with its principled assertion of the innate dignity and worth of each and every single human being as an individual rather than simply part of a greater whole. In his words, “The numbering of a people is the most potent symbol of mankind-in-the-mass, of a society in which the individual is not valued in and for him or herself but as part of a totality. That is precisely what Israel was not....Israel’s strength had nothing to do with numbers.”¹ In other words, taking a census might give the mistaken impression that it is the collective mass rather than the individual soul that stands supreme. When it comes to people, writes, Sacks, “we should never forget that each is different, each a universe, each a distinctive fragment of the Divine.”² Better to focus on each person separately rather than lumping them all together.

Sacks concludes by pointing out that the very phrase we use to command a census throughout Torah, *naso et rosh*, or literally “lift the head,” – the very phrase that gives us the name of our Torah portion this morning - is a most unusual one whereas any number of more typical verbs for counting might have been used instead. He takes this to mean that censuses in Israel were to be undertaken with a particular thoughtfulness and care in mind, that they were to be carried out in a way that preserved individual dignity. In his words, “Those entrusted with the task [of census] are commanded to lift up the spirits of those they count, making each individual stand tall in the knowledge that he is loved, cherished, held special by God, and not merely a number, a cipher, among the thousands or millions.”³

¹ Jonathan Sacks, “Covenant and Conversation,” p. 76.

² Ibid, p. 77.

³ Ibid. p. 77.

It is this kind of counting, one that preserves the worth of the individual, to which we should always aspire.

Modern society is, of course, a bit different from ancient Israel or ancient Egypt or ancient Greece and power and status are no longer so strictly determined by size. Yet still, in our day, there are times in which particular “metrics” come to take on outsized importance, dwarfing the individual human beings behind the numbers. Whether it is a person’s score on the SAT, or the balance in her checking account, or the number on his bathroom scale; whether it is the amount of members in a synagogue or the yield for admitted students at a university or the valuation rate for a company, we know that quantity does not necessarily equal quality and it certainly doesn’t equal value or worth. True strength comes not from being bigger or stronger or richer or more powerful than the next guy but rather comes from feeling of being connected to the inherent dignity and significance that is ours as lovingly created products of the Divine. Each of us is a part of God’s unique and treasured collection of souls.

This Shabbat, of course, is also the beginning of Memorial Day weekend, an occasion which might best be known for retail sales and barbeques and the unofficial start of summer but which actually captures some of the same meaning and message as does *Parashat Naso*. In war, the collective becomes important – the number of troops an army has will often (but not always) influence success; the individual is sublimated to the group, and the enemy is seen not as a distinct human being but rather a generic part of a faceless “them.” And yet, in the end, it is not the group that reigns supreme but rather the individual – on this day of memory we honor each fallen soldier and the sacrifices he or she made, remembering each soldier’s bravery and service and mourning for family members deprived of those whom they love. While a group of people together may be able to accomplish incredible things – protecting citizens from harm, safeguarding important ideals like democracy and freedom, fighting on

behalf of those who cannot fight for themselves – it is the individual alone who has the ability to touch our lives through their presence and break our hearts through their absence. We have only to think of the difference in feel between Memorial Day here in American, where most of us are fortunate enough not to have been personally touched by this kind of loss, and *Yom HaZikaron* in Israel, where every family has seen a soldier fall, to recognize the power of the individual. The group may inspire patriotism and pride, but only the one inspires love and devotion.

It has been many years since I pulled out my old sticker books, and I imagine that in a few years Kendall will trade pretend food and stuffed animals for more mature hobbies; many collections, indeed, are borne out of a particular time and place. But for us, the Jewish people, we will hopefully remain God's treasured possession. We are valued not only for who we are as a group but who we are as individuals as well.

Shabbat Shalom!