

The Almighty's Conscripts
BaMidbar 5781

Our Sages referred to Sefer BaMidbar as *Sefer Ha-Pekudim*, the Book of Counting, more commonly referred to as the Book of Numbers. The reasons for this are simple enough; the Torah's fourth book begins with a counting of the generation which left Egypt, and closes with a counting of the generation which would merit entry into Israel.

However, the Hebrew term *pekudah*, in addition to connoting a numerical count, has an additional meaning, that of a command. It is a term with a military implication, one entirely appropriate for a census which enumerated all men over twenty as the nascent armed forces, *kol yotze tzava b'yisrael*. The prevalence of trumpets and flags in the Torah's description of the Jewish camp are also unmistakably militaristic elements. What are we to make of these references?

Many of the commentators, such as Rashbam, assert a pragmatic perspective. The Jewish people were about to commence hostilities with the Canaanite nations, and knowing the size of the fighting force was imperative before the outset of the campaign. Yet, this answer alone may not be sufficient, for the reason that even the tribe of Levi, who were not included in the fighting force, are also described as being counted *litzvo tzava*, in association with their tabernacle based work, *la'avod avodah b'ohel mo'ed*.

Given the fact that both the term *pekudim*, as well as *tzava*, are extended to the tribe of Levi as well, we might pursue a different approach than the most straightforward understanding of the significance of these militaristic elements.

Military service, at its finest, is a celebration of some of humanity's finest virtues; discipline, duty, self-sacrifice, integrity, mutual responsibility, and unrelenting accountability.

By employing military terms and concepts in describing God's enumeration of the Jewish people, we are reminded that we are meant to bring these cherished virtues to bear in service of the Almighty