

The Almighty's Conscripts *BaMidbar 5782*

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. Indeed, no less an authority than Ramban argued that the term *tzava* connoted not merely a military encampment but a large gathering, which was typically reserved for those over twenty years of age.

As such, we might suggest that one need not understand the census in the sense that these individuals were literally to be conscripted for an army, though we might suggest that a 'military ethos' is deeply relevant to the census. Military service, at its finest, is a celebration of some of humanity's most exalted 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.

This approach may be supported by the clear differentiation that existed within the framework of the camp. *Ish al diglo v'otot l'veit avotam yachanu Bnei Yisrael*, each tribe, with its own flag, with its own color, with its own symbolism, marked each tribe. The tribal culture of Yissachar and Zevulun were not identical, nor were those of Yehuda and Reuven. And yet, as in a military context, what matters is that each soldier and battalion should serve their function. If the artillery fails, while the armor advances, or the infantry succeed, while the naval or aerial forces falter, the mission as a whole will likely be compromised.

And so it is with our communal Avodat Hashem. A visceral sense that each one of us has a critical role to play in the *tzeva Hashem*, the Divine army, which is at once highly geared to our specific talents, while also essential for the success of the entire 'army', is absolutely vital to one's service of Hashem. It combines the

unequivocal validation of personal proclivity within Avodat Hashem, along the lines of ein adam lomed ela b' makom she'libo chafetz, while ensuring that our sights are not only set inward but outward, with a concern for the entrie nation.

In the inimitable words of R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi, it allows for the optimal state of spiritual affairs- tiferet l'oseha, on the one hand, while ensuring the vitality of the whole, v'tiferet lo min ha'adam.