

And now a thought for Shabbat

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַמִּגְדָּה...

שָׁאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ | כָּל־עֵדֶת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם כָּל־יָצֵא צָבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:

When the plague was over, the LORD said to Moses and to Eleazar son of Aaron the priest saying Take a census of the whole Israelite community from the age of twenty years and up...

Tamar Fix, our amazing executive director, has a practice that always used to strike me (don't tell her I said this) as unnecessary. After the Annual Shul Dinner, when the photographs had arrived, she would get the Office Staff to make a collage of people's faces from the dinner, and frame it and hang it in the office. (Last year's is at the top of this email. Working in the Shul office today, I realize (again!) that I was wrong and she was right! Faces are so, so precious. I never knew how much I would miss your face....

Sefer Bamidbar is called the Book of Numbers because it is full of counting. At the very beginning of the book there is a census of the Jewish People. But here again, after 40 years, after a devastating Plague, there is another census. It seems repetitive, and the details seem unnecessary. But let's look closely:

In Chapter One - the first count - Moses is told

שָׁאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עֵדֶת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם בְּמִסְפָּר שְׁמוֹת כָּל־זָכָר לְגִלְגָּלָתָם:

Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head.

In Chapter 26 - our Parsha - Moshe is told, as we saw above, to count the People. What is the difference?

The first count was a count of 'names'. Names imply importance, standing, recognition. To know and use somebody's name is to honor them.

But this count there are no names. Just counting people. Why? Well I cannot say that this is the real explanation - but as a Rabbi I can say this is my answer, in July 2020, after (Please G-d) a plague of our own.

We talk about putting a name to face. I go to Shul - and I want to connect with someone. "I have seen you around, I notice you are new - I recognize you - please, what is your name?"

But our reality is the opposite. All we have is names. I see your names all the time. On Zoom calls, on emails, on texts, on lists, signing up for Cheesecake, the Dinner, Minyan. I see over and over again names of hundreds of people. I have the names. But after the Plague it's the faces I yearn for. To see a name is not the same as to see a person. To be in the same room, to be present, in company. More important than putting a 'name to a face?' - putting a face (back) to a name.

Even in Shul, with our - thank G-d amazingly busy Minyanim - we all wear face masks. But a masked face is still a face. Here is my peshat (explanation) of our Parsha. Feel free to reject it - G-d did not tell Moses to count the names of the people after the Plague. He didn't need to. Moshe knew their names. He most probably davened for every single one of them., by name. Instead, G-d told Moshe to count them - their faces, their presence - after so long hiding, sheltering from the Plague, that was the only counting that made sense.

Names are important, precious, things. Let no one's name ever be forgotten. But let us pray that day by day, in safety, in health and in joy, we can again rejoice in each other's presence. To smile at each other, to hug each other (within Halachic guidelines, obviously!) to be present for each other. The day - after the Plague - when we no longer count each other's names, we count them as people in our lives - that day WILL come. And I can't wait.

With much love, and Shabbat Shalom.

Shaul Robinson