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WHAT'S IN A TITLE? A RAV BY ANY OTHER NAME WOULD TEACH AS SWEET

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Sefer Bamidbar is known as Numeri in Latin, and Numbers in English. Chazal call it Chumash HaPekudim, the Volume of Countings. All this gives a sense that the book is about masses of people rather than about individuals.

The contrast with Sefer Shemot, the Book of Names, is stark. Shemot covers the transition of the Jewish people from a family, each of whose members is listed, to a teeming nation. Bamidbar assumes nationhood and the primacy of the collective.

Or not. The word "shemot" appears **15 times** in the first chapter of Bamidbar. It might well have been called Names if the title weren't already taken. Each tribal census follows G-d's command to produce a number – of names. Every individual counted had to be known in their individuality. There was no lining up in even rows and counting off. Possibly – this is a matter of dispute among rabbinic commentators – there was not even an abstract representation of individuals by the common token of the half-shekel, as there was in - Shemot.

Yet the names of the counted individuals are not listed in Bamidbar. This might be for reasons of space and weight – imagine doing hagboh on the expanded Torah! But more likely, the reason is that while G-d can know each star by name, even the greatest prophet ever could not know each Jew by name. Effective leadership requires effective administration, and that meant dividing people up into manageable units and generally dealing directly only with unit managers. This was the advice Yitro gave to Mosheh back in – Shemot.

Sefer Bamidbar is therefore about managing the dynamic interplay and dialectic tension between individual and collective identity, and relationships.

One management solution is for each layer of a hierarchy to relate to the one immediately below it as individuals, while recognizing that those individuals represent the interests of a large group. The Torah may adopt this approach by naming the tribal leaders who conduct the census under Mosheh and Aharon's direction.

Careful attention to the Torah's language suggests that the individuality of these leaders is emphasized in the initial command, even before they are named. Finally, verse 17 shows that Mosheh and Aharon internalized the message: "Mosheh and Aharon took those people, *asber nikvu b'shemot.*" Since the leaders had just been listed, the antecedent of "those people" is clear, but the Torah nonetheless reemphasizes that Mosheh and Aharon identified them by name.

But we may be overstating the importance of names. Names by themselves may not tell us more than numbers do. Richard Feynman was once walking with his father when he saw what was to him a new bird, and asked his father about it. His father taught him the bird's name in various languages. But when he had proudly memorized that information, his father pointed out that he still knew nothing whatever about the bird – only what people called it.

Feynman's story relates to the names of species, not the names of individuals. But the point transfers. Names become meaningful only when they are mnemonics for specific information and experiences.

Seforno argues that the names of the Desert Generation encoded the essence of a person. They enabled one person to know another the first time they interacted.

כי היה אז כל אחד מאותו הדור נחשב
בשמו המורה על צורתו האשית למעלתם
על דרך "ואדעך בשם" (שמות לג, יז)
ולא כן קרה לדור באי הארץ,
ובכן לא נמנו במספר שמות
ולא נזכרו זולתי ראשי המשפחות ומספר האישים.
ועם זה הודיע שהיתה הכונה
שאותם האישים בעצמם יחיו ויירשו הארץ
ולא יפקד מהם איש:

*Every member of that generations was considered
via their name that indicated their specific human form and their
greatness*

*In the manner of "and I have known you by name" (Shemot 33:17),
But this was not the fate of the generation that entered the Land,*

and therefore they were not counted "by the number of names," and all that are mentioned are the family heads and the number of men.

By this He informs us that the original intent was that these very people would live to inherit the Land, not one man would be missing from their count.

This is a powerful explanation if true, but it seems to be an assumption rather than something derived from our text. Similarly, perhaps the Torah is telling us here that Mosheh and Aharon already had relationships with these individuals. But this is not stated explicitly, or even hinted at, in the text.

So far we have assumed that the key difference is name vs. number. An alternative is that names are opposed to titles.

Let's look closely at the way the Torah presents the men who will assist Mosheh and Aharon with the census (v. 4-17).

וְאַתְּכֶם יְהִיוּ אִישׁ אִישׁ לַמִּטָּה אִישׁ אִישׁ לְבֵית-אֲבֹתָיו הוּא וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר יַעֲמְדוּ אִתְּכֶם לְרֹאשֵׁי . . .
אֵלֶּה קְרִיאֵי קְרוֹאֵי הָעֵדָה נְשִׂאֵי מִטּוֹת אֲבוֹתָם רֹאשֵׁי אֶלְפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
הֵם:

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶת הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר נִקְּבוּ בְשֵׁמֹת:

Together with you, there will be one man per staff;

Each man will be the head of his ancestral household.

These are the names of the men who will stand together with you:

For Reuven . . .

These are the conveners of the community

the princes of the staffs of their ancestors

they are the heads of the thousands of Israel.

Mosheh and Aharon took those men, who had been identified by names.

The Torah makes clear that these men were not chosen by lot; they were chosen because they already held leadership positions. They had many titles. The Torah mentions all these titles in its **description** of them. But Hashem's instructions to Mosheh and Aharon, and their fulfillment of those instructions, refer only to their names.

A suggestion as to why may emerge from the last line of Tosefta Eduyot. It's not clear what the proper text of that line is. Here is likely the earliest version we have, cited in the Arukh {s.v. "אב"} from a letter of Rav Sherira Gaon:

מי ש"ל תלמידים ולתלמידיו תלמידים - קורין אותו רבי,

נשתבחו תלמידיו - קורין אותו רבן

נשתבחו אלו ואלו - קורין אותו בשמו

One who has students, and his students have students – they call him

Rebbe

If his students improve = nishtabchu – they call him Rabban

If these and those improve – they call him by his name.

This seems to be saying that a teacher who succeeds in creating a multilink chain of tradition deserves the title Rebbe. Those whose direct students are themselves noteworthy receive the title Rabban. Someone who has noteworthy students and noteworthy grandstudents is beyond titles.

This version accords with what seems to have been a Rabbinic proverb, although it is not found in our written record of Chazal:

גדול מרב רבי

גדול מרבי רבן

גדול מרבן שמו

Greater than "Rav" is "Rebbe";

Greater than "Rebbe" is "Rabban";

Greater than "Rabban" is his name.

Reading this idea into our parshah, we can say that the Torah is emphasizing that the people chosen to stand with Mosheh were known to be worthy of their positions, rather than merely filling them. They were the equivalent of sports stars or cultural figures who become known by one name only, rather than needing both first and last name to identify them.

Calling teachers by name is a violation of Halakhah. But not always - only when their name is seen as embodying less respect than a title. When they reach the level of having two generations of noteworthy students, referring to them by title becomes less respectful than referring to them by name. Thus for example it may be improper to refer to Hillel as Rabbi Hillel, except in cultures where his name would not be recognized.

The question of insisting on titles, as opposed to earning one's reputation and influence by personal merit, reverberates in Orthodoxy today. The Rabbinic proverb suggests that while titles are never sufficient, they are a necessary stage in the process of earning communal respect, and even the greatest scholars cannot do without them until their position is established by generations of students who have experienced their Torah. But the parashah teaches that leaders should never be chosen simply because they already have titles.