Counting Jews

Introduction

First portion in Book of Numbers, Bamidbar, begins with a census of the Israelites (whence “Numbers”) -- the third in the space of a year! (Appropriate: This year, 2020, is the year of the American census.)

On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, saying:

שְׂאַו אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְׂמִשְׂפָּחֹתָם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם בְּמִסְּפָר שֵׁמֵם כָּל־זָּכָּר לְגֻלָּם׃

Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head.
You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms. [Num. 1:1-3]

The Midrash adds:

On ten occasions were Israel counted:
- Once when they went down to Egypt [Genesis 46:27].
- A second time when they came out [Exodus 12:37].
- A third time after the incident of the Golden Calf [Exodus 30:12].
- Twice in the Book of Numbers:
  - once in connection with the formation of the camps [Numbers 1]
  - and once in connection with the division of the land [Numbers 26].
- Twice in the days of Saul [1Samuel 11:8, 15:4].
- The eighth time in the days of David [2Samuel 24:9].
- The ninth time in the days of Ezra [Ezra 2:64; Nehemiah 7:66].
- The tenth time will be in the future era of the Messiah, when, [as Jeremiah said:]
  The sheep shall pass again under the hands of one who counts them [said the Lord]. [Jeremiah 33:13]
[Numbers Rabbah 2:11]

Why all these censuses?
1-Practical reasons: How many to feed, how many can fight, how many survived, etc.

2-Because God loves Israel

Rashi: Because of God’s great love for Israel, He counted them often.

The Ramban notes: A Hebrew word for “count”, pakod, also means “to remember”, “to be concerned with”.

However, when King David ordered a census, against the advice of his chief of staff, Joab, God became angry and 70,000 people died of a plague. The Torah indeed warns there is risk in a census:

Then God said to Moses, “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. Everyone who is entered in the records shall pay ... a half-shekel as an offering to the Lord.” [Ex. 30:11-13].

Perhaps David’s people did not do that and counted directly?

David repented:

But afterward David reproached himself for having numbered the people. And David said to the Lord, “I have sinned grievously in what I have done. Please, O Lord, remit the guilt of Your servant, for I have acted foolishly.” [2Sam. 24:10]

Some will no doubt say that the coronavirus plague we are facing today is punishment for the census. (Worse in the US than elsewhere.)

3-A census implies that each individual is significant.

The Torah line translated as “Take a census of the whole Israelite community” is, in fact, “Lift up the heads of the whole Israelite community” - שֵׁאֵאֲתָוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ Se’u et rosh, - make each person count, and, in so doing, affirm the worth of the individual.

Mishna:

Whoever destroys one life is considered as if he had destroyed an entire world; and whoever saves one life is considered as if he had saved an entire world… [Mishna, Sanhedrin 4:1 (22a)]

Rav Nachman of Breslov:
Minority opinions are recorded in Talmud, not silenced. Two Jews produce three opinions. Jews are small in number yet achieved great things: It’s the individual who counts.

4-A census implies that each individual counts the same as another.

Equalizer. All people are created equal in the image of God. Rich or poor: ½ shekel each.

Yet it still reduces an individual to a number (Holocaust: Nazis tattooed a number on the arms of Jews). Perhaps as a reminder of that:

**We may not directly count Jews**

Why not?

The prophet Hosea says:
- The number of the Children of Israel shall be like that of the sands of the sea, which cannot be measured or counted. [Hosea 2:1]

From this the Talmud concludes that it is forbidden to count Jews directly:
- Rabbi Eleazar said: Whoever counts Israel transgresses a prohibition, as the prophet Hosea said… [Yoma 22b]

Indeed, the Torah (see above) says that, rather than count the people directly, they collected a half-shekel from each person then counted the coins. Also, King Saul counted his soldiers by requiring each to give one shard of pottery, and then the shards were counted, [1Samuel 11:8]. Later he used kid goats. [1Samuel 15:4]

Why this prohibition?
- Rashi: When Jews are counted directly and are not deemed worthy, they may get punished. [Puts “evil eye” spotlight on each.]
- Others reinforce this: When Jews are in a group, they are connected to God by their collective merit, but when they are counted, they
become individuals and come under individual scrutiny. [Rabbenu Bahya, Panim Yafot on Exodus]
-Sforno: A census draws attention to who is dead and who is still alive, which raises the dangerous question: Why am I alive and others dead?
-Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: We are very small in number: 0.2% of humanity.

Milton Himmelfarb: the number of Jews is smaller than a statistical error in the Chinese census.
If emphasize this may lead to low morale. Our strength is not in numbers. Torah (above) says: Ask Jews to give, then count their contributions. It’s the contributions that “count”. We gave the world a lot.
-For reasons of security. (No lists or counts antisemites could use.)

However, this prohibition is not in the Code of Jewish Law, although it is a well-entrenched custom. The matter is discussed by many commentators. [Magen Avrohom 156; Alter Rebbe on Shulchan Aruch 156:15]

**Actual counting practices**

- The count must always be indirect. Rambam:
  
  It is forbidden to count Israelites except by means of some other object. [Mishneh Torah, Daily Offerings and Additional Offerings 4:4]

- There must be a valid purpose for the counting. Ramban: Counting Jews without a purpose is forbidden. (Another of King David’s errors?)

- You may say: “Not one, not two, etc.”

- For a minyan, you may use a Torah verse that contains ten words. [Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 15:3.] Example:
  
  הושיע את עמך וברך את נחלתם וrvine ונסם עד הולך
  *Hoshiah et amecha u'varech et nachalatecha ur'em venas'em ad ha'olam.*
  
  Save Your people and bless Your inheritance, and tend them and elevate them forever. [Psalms 28:9]

- You may count body parts (e.g., noses), but not body parts whose removal would be fatal (e.g., head).

- Dispute as to whether you can count Jews in your head.
Once the count is completed, you may say the total. (Because the total numbers of the various tribes are stated in the Torah.)

-You may not participate in a counting even if you are not doing the counting. Dispute: May one participate in a census in Israel?
  -Some say it's OK because one counts written names, not people, and non-Jews are included.
  -Many others disagree unless the number of people per family is not calculated.

Shabbat shalom.