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To Be or Not to Be

To be or not to be; that is the question.

הוֹשִׁיעָה אֶת עַמְּךָ וּבְרַךְ אֶת נַחֲלֶתְךָ וְרַעַם וְנִשְׂאִים עַד הָעוֹלָם

Old McDonald had a farm; ee ei, ee ei, oh.

What do these three sentences have in common? They each have ten words and they can each be used in place of directly counting the number of adult Jewish men in the room as we wait for a minyan to convene. A more common practice is to simply count, preferably in Yiddish, “not one, not two, not three.”

The reason for not simply counting is a command right at the start of our *parashah* that mandates using a roundabout method for counting Jews:

כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְקֹדֵיהֶם וְנָתַנּוּ אִישׁ כֶּפֶר נַפְשׁוֹ לַה' בַּפְּקֹד אֹתָם וְלֹא־יְהִי בָהֶם גָּגַף בַּפְּקֹד אֹתָם:

“When you take a census of the Israelite people according to their number, each shall pay the LORD a ransom for himself on being counted, that no plague may come upon them through their being counted.”

The Torah here introduces the mitzvah of collecting a half-shekel from each man of military age. The money was used for the upkeep of the *beit hamidash* and the sum of *shekalim* collected would indicate the size of the army that could be called together from the population. If 1,000 *shekalim* were gathered, that meant 2,000 men of military age, if 5,000 *shekalim* were collected, that meant a population of 10,000 men of military age and so on.

But why does the Torah demand that we engage in this roundabout method of counting? What is wrong with directly counting individuals? The Torah says that if we do it will bring a plague: וְלֹא־יְהִי בָהֶם גָּגַף what is so dangerous about counting?

Indeed, centuries later, *Dovid HaMelekh*, King David, forgot this lesson and called for a census of his kingdom.

In Chapter 24 of *Shmuel Bet*, we are told of the census ordered by King David.

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־יֹאבֵב | שֶׁר־הַחַיִל אֲשֶׁר־אִתּוֹ שׁוֹטֵטִים בְּכָל־שִׁבְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִדָּן וְעַד־בְּאֵר שָׁבַע וּפְקְדוּ אֶת־הָעָם וַיַּדְעֵתִי אֶת מִסְפַּר הָעָם:

“The king said to Yoav, -his army commander, “Make the rounds of all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beer-sheba, and take a census of the people, so that I may know the size of the population.”

And so it happened.

וַיִּתְּנוּ יוֹאֵב אֶת־מִסְפַּר מִפְּקֹדֵי־הָעָם אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ וַתְּהִי יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁמְנֵהָ מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף אִישׁ־חַיִל שֶׁלָּף חָרַב וְאִישׁ יְהוּדָה חֲמֵשׁ־מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף אִישׁ:

“Joab reported to the king the number of the people that had been recorded: in Israel there were 800,000 soldiers ready to draw the sword, and the men of Judah numbered 500,000. But afterward David reproached himself for having numbered the people.”

In language we echo in our Tahanun prayers, “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.”

The reaction to this sinful census was quick in coming.

When David goes to the prophet Gad to repent, he is given a choice. Punishment can come directly from God in the form of a plague, the נִגַף that is mentioned in *Parashat Ki Tissa*, or punishment can come from a foreign invasion. In language that is also echoed in our daily *Tahanun* prayers, David chooses to be punished directly by God.

The plague that follows is personified in *Tanakh* as an angel with a sword spread over David’s kingdom. When the sword reaches Yerushalayim, God orders the plague to stop:

“But when the angel extended his hand against Yerushalayim to destroy it, the LORD renounced further punishment and said to the angel who was destroying the people, “Enough! Stay your hand!” The angel of the LORD was then by the threshing floor of Aravnah the Jebusite.”

David begs for mercy on behalf of his people, “punish me only” he begs but spare the people, and God then tells David to begin the process of building the *Beit HaMikdash* right on the spot of that threshing floor where the plague came to an end.

So what is so bad about counting people?

Counting people directly reduces them to mere numbers. Numbers are interchangeable. Numbers have no unique identity. People should never be reduced to numbers. David might have had a need to know the size of the army that he could potentially muster in case of war. And there are many times when good policy requires knowing how many people are in a certain place at a certain time. If there are ten Jewish men in the *beis medrash* on a weekday afternoon, (this week, starting at 5:20), then we will say Mincha with *devarim sh’bedushah* (*kaddish*, *kedushah* etc.). I sometimes count how many *siddurim* are being used in shul at any time to help pace the flow of the service on Shabbat morning. (There are almost always between 30 and 40 siddurim in use when the Torah is removed from the ark on Shabbat morning).

But whenever policy requires knowing how many people there are in a certain place at a certain time, the Torah tells us to take an indirect census through the collection of half-shekel coins. By directly counting his soldiers David treated his subjects interchangeably, as an undifferentiated mass in which any soldier could be replaced by another and the individual life of not one of them mattered. We can never treat one another in such an instrumental fashion

And there is another reason why direct counting is problematic. This reason doesn’t look forward towards the time of David, but looks backwards to the time of the patriarchs and matriarchs. When Avraham and Sarah were promised a child of their own, Avraham was told:

וַיֹּצֵא אֱתֹו הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲבֵט־נָא הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וּסְפֹר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם־תּוּכַל לִסְפֹר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה זְרַעֲךָ:

He took him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He added, “So shall your offspring be.”

We cannot count the stars and we cannot count Jews. Two generations later, when Yaakov turns to God in distress prior to his confrontation with his brother Esav he says:

וַאֲפֹה אֲמַרְתָּ הֵיטֵב אֵיטֵיב עִמָּךְ וְשִׂמְתִי אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ כְּחֹל הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִסְפָּר מְרֹב:

“Yet You have said, ‘I will deal bountifully with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to count.’”

For Avraham and for Yaakov, for the first generations of the family that would become the Jewish people, counting Jews was understood as contrary to our very identity. The reason why we cannot be counted is not because there are too many of us. The world Jewish population is within the margin of error of the Chinese census. The reason why we cannot be counted is because our purpose as a people is to cultivate an identity that does not depend on the strength of numbers alone. We are not too numerous for counting, but our impact must not ever become dependent on our numbers.

Dovid HaMelekh erred in this way too.. He thought he could take stock of his kingdom and evaluate his own governance by counting his population, but his enduring legacy would be writing *Tehilim*, uniting the twelve tribes, for a time, into a cohesive kingdom, and serving as an eternal model for *teshuvah* and penitence. Dovid HaMelekh put all of that at risk because he thought his kingdom would rise and fall based on numbers. Only when he recognizes what he did wrong, does God instruct him to purchase the site for the beit hamikdash and this will become one of the greatest achievements of his reign and of his kingdom.

Dovid HaMelekh may have been the first but he was not the last political leader to inappropriately count his constituents and inappropriately use numbers to think about his relationship with the population that he lead. Some, for the most noble, sincere, and positive reasons turn their populations into numbers alone in order to pursue their goals and therefore come to think about them interchangeably. Others focus so much on numbers that they evaluate ideas not based on whether they are right or wrong, or whether they are true or false, but based on how popular they are.

Here in America, everyone knows that it takes 270 votes in the electoral college to win a presidential election. It doesn't matter where those votes come from or how a candidate motivates their base to turn out and why. They are just numbers to get to the goal. It takes 218 seats to control the House of Representatives. It doesn't matter if an individual deserves to be in congress or not so long as they help get to that goal of 218. In Israel the number that everyone is focusing on this election season is the 61 seats it takes for a Knesset majority.

In 1902 Rabbi Yitzhak Reines formed the Mizrahi as an Orthodox branch of the Zionist movement. He worked alongside Theodor Herzl to convince Orthodox Jews to affiliate with Zionism. In the years that followed the Mizrahi and its successor organizations, including *Poalei HaMizrahi*, the Mizrahi Worker's Party, founded the religious *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*, established Bnai Akiva, and built a network of religious primary and secondary schools throughout Israel. After the establishment of the State of Israel, the Mizrahi, through the National Religious Party or *Mafdal*, sat in almost every single government, usually controlling cabinet positions too, from 1948 until today. The jewel in the crown of Religious Zionism are the network of *mechinot* and *yeshivot hesder* that allow for advanced Torah scholarship alongside service to the State of Israel in the IDF. I was fortunate to have studied at one such hesder yeshiva where I studied alongside classmates who today have become budding Torah scholars and I also learned alongside classmates who unfortunately lost their lives during their service in *Tzahal*.

This past week, facing a challenging electoral landscape, the successor party of the *Mafdal* entered into a strategic partnership with a political party called *Otzmah Yehudit*, or the Jewish Power party. *Otzmah Yehudit* is lead by the students and admirers of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane who was banned from the Knesset for racist incitement in the 1980s and admirers of Baruch Goldstein the mass-murderer and Jewish terrorist.

Yitzhak Shamir, the most right wing prime minister in Israel's history, would walk out of the Knesset in protest, and lead every other member of the Knesset with him, whenever Rabbi Kahane would address the Knesset during the brief period of time when he was a member of Knesset. This week, the successor of the

National Religious Party paved the way for the return of Kahanism to the Knesset and possibly to the governing coalition as well.

I'm a member of an email list-serve for rabbinic alumni of the Israeli yeshiva that I mentioned earlier. As rabbis often do, we send emails to one another discussing possible *drasha* topics that are topical and that also relate to the parasha. This week, one of my colleagues wrote to the list and asked, "who is going to say something about the Israeli spacecraft being sent to the moon?" Another member of the list-serve quickly wrote back, and I paraphrase:

"Who are you kidding?! If only anyone cared about the rocket launch given all that has happened this week"

That email was written by someone whom I greatly admire and I try to hear him speak each time I'm in Israel and so I wrote to him and asked if he knew what he would speak about this Shabbat.

He told me that he was going to speak about the opinion of Ibn Ezra that there were only three thousand Jews who participated in the sin of the Golden Calf. Three thousand people out of a population of hundreds of thousands is just a tiny percentage. And yet that tiny fringe and extreme minority were sufficient to taint an entire generation and lead to one of the greatest sins in Jewish history. A small group of extremists, a tiny fringe of just a handful of people, can and have lead to catastrophe.

To close on a more hopeful note, I remind you that Rabbi Nahman of Breslov taught:

אם תאמין שיכולים לקלקל תאמין שיכולים לתקן.

If you believe that it's possible for people to destroy and ruin things, then logically you must believe in the capacity of people to fix things.

Indeed, a small group can accomplish great things. If you need an example, just think of Israel, a very small country that managed to send a rocket to the moon.