

Parshat Bamidbar 5777

Counting to infinity? This week's *parsha* opens with HaShem's instruction to Moshe to take a census of the *Bnei Yisrael* (Children of Israel). This is not the first time a census had been taken and *Rashi* comments that the reason for the repeated occasions when a census is taken is to demonstrate HaShem's love for the *Bnei Yisrael*. They are dear to Him therefore He counted them on a number of occasions.

The *Tzena U'rena* quotes the *Toldos Yitzchak* that the various countings demonstrated different aspects of the love between HaShem and the *Bnei Yisrael*; familial love, love of a ruler to a people and love of a people to their ruler. The census which took place when they left Egypt demonstrates familial love – HaShem had declared that *Israel is my first born son* (Ex 4:22). The census which took place after they had received the punishment for the golden calf is the love of a ruler in fair judgement and recognition that the people had repented. This census, about to take place, recognises both the people's love for HaShem and, in return, HaShem's wish to rest his *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) on them.

Counting is also associated with something measured. There is a well known Rabbinic dictum that blessing does not come to something measured or counted although there are discussions on when and how this applies. The first sentence of the *Haftorah* from Hosea (2:1) is that the "*number of the Children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea which cannot be measured and cannot be counted*". So here perhaps is the response to any concern over the finite of the count. The blessing is that there is no ill effect from the counting. In being counted, they are being neither bounded nor measured, and correspondingly Hashem's love for His people is neither bounded nor measured, it is infinite.

In the wilderness Indeed, HaShem wanted to cause His *Shechinah* to rest on the *Bnei Yisrael*, and as a demonstration of how important this was, we are provided with a level of detail regarding both where and when this instruction took place. The location was *beMidbar Sinai be'Ohel Moed* (Num 1:1) – *in the desert of Sinai in the Tent of Meeting*. The last verse of the previous parsha states with regard to the preceding commandments that they "*had been commanded by HaShem, to Moshe, for the Children of Israel at Mt. Sinai*". Therefore the location of revelation of the *Shechinah* had shifted, the *Ohel Moed* was now a centrality in the encampment of the *Bnei Yisrael* with the *Shechinah* now focussed there.

The timing was on the first day of the second month in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt (Num 1:1). They had dedicated the *Ohel Moed* and ideally were preparing to enter the land of Israel. So this was at a crucial juncture before the subsequent events unfolded which caused them to remain 'in the desert' for another nearly thirty nine years.

The concept of being 'in the wilderness' is often used in our colloquial speech as a metaphor for aimlessness and loss of direction. However, the commentators take a different and more positive view, one from which we learn significant lessons.

Baal HaTurim notes that a juxtaposition of the last sentence of the previous *Parsha* "*these are the commandments*" (Lev 27:34) with the current phrase "*in the desert*" provides some deeper meaning. The verse seems to be emphasising this phrase. *Baal HaTurim* states that people who do not consider themselves as a desert will not be able to know Torah and commandments. The message is that just as a desert is free to all to enter, a person must make oneself free and accessible to learning Torah. *Tzena U'rena*, quoting the *Midrash*, states that Torah was given to Israel through three things: fire, water and desert. At the Giving of the Torah, fire and water were both present through the lightning and the rain. Desert not only represents the literal physical locale but represents the need for humility; therefore a person wishing to study Torah in a proper frame of mind similarly needs to work on their humility.

So being in the desert can be a positive indicator of the relationship between Hashem and His people. There is some further indication of this in the *Neviim* (Prophets) where Hashem remembers and praises the *Bnei Yisrael* for their demonstration of faithfulness in the desert, to "*walk after me in the desert, in a land which is not sown*" (Jer 2:2). So the desert was also a place where the relationship between HaShem and the *Bnei Yisrael* could develop and mature.

Perhaps it is then no coincidence that the last verses of the *Haftorah* also deal in a metaphorical way with the relationship between HaShem and His people. "*And I will betroth you to me forever, and I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice and in kindness and in mercy, and I will betroth you to me in faithfulness and you will know that I am HaShem*" (Hos 2:21-22). It is described as an everlasting bond, but it is not totally unconditional. We are blessed by HaShem but in return have to recognise HaShem is providing these blessings in a relationship whose origin was forged 'in the wilderness'.