

Customs and Laws from the Parsha: Bamidbar

A version of this article first appeared in Daf HaShavuah published by the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue.

Take the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by families following their fathers' houses; a head count of every male according to the number of their names. (Bamidbar 1:2)

The book of Numbers begins with the first of many censuses of the Jewish people. Rashi (d. 1104) comments that God counts His people at certain times to show His love for each individual. Nachmanides (known as 'Ramban' d. 1270) adds that rather than counting individuals directly, the Torah stipulates using an indirect method by counting the half shekel coin from each person (Exodus 30:12-13).

The Talmud forbids the direct counting of Jews in any circumstances (Hosea 2:1, Yoma 22b). According to Rashi, since the Jewish people are one unit, known as Kneset Yisrael (the community of Israel) which is judged as a unit, counting individual Jews subjects everyone to individual scrutiny and judgement (Rashi *ibid.*).

King Saul counted his armies using shards of pottery or kid goats (Samuel I 11: 8 and 15:4). Yet when King David conducted a census, it resulted in a plague which killed tens of thousands of Jews (Samuel II chapter 24).

Nachmanides explains that although David counted indirectly, it was for his own curiosity. Rabbi Abraham Gombiner (known as the 'Magen Avraham', d. 1682) derives from this that counting Jews without good reason is forbidden even if it is done in an indirect way.

One of the practical applications of this law occurs when trying to ascertain if ten men are present in Shul to constitute a minyan (quorum) for prayer. As it is forbidden to count each person directly, a verse containing ten words (such as Psalms 28:9) is recited to determine the number of men in the room. Once the count has been made it is permitted to announce the number of people.

Even though this sounds like a loophole, the Torah teaches us an important message. While we are inherently individuals, we also form an intrinsic part of a greater collective. We can only achieve so much on our own, but together we take on a different status with greater significance which can attain the greatest heights.

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