

# A Mathematician's Dream

Parshat B'Midbar is often described as “a mathematician's dream.”

It features lots of numbers with the census of the Israelites to prepare them from entering the Land of Israel. It therefore makes perfect sense that we have made this Accountants and Finance Shabbat.

It's essential to account for every person, whether it is 24 (as we had on the congregational Israel trip) or 240,000. Every ten years we have a new population census which directly affects states' electoral votes. For the Israelites' sake they needed to be counted in order to make preparations for war and for the districting of the Land of Canaan. At the same time, how can we read this list of population without glossing over sections or becoming distracted? How do we impart meaning to each detail of the list?

Rashi gives a very interesting take on this. He comments מתוך חיבתן<sup>1</sup> “Because of their (Israel's) dearness to Him, He counts them at every moment.” What is most dear to us is what we

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<sup>1</sup> ד"ה וידבר, במדבר סיני, באחד לחדש 1:1 Rashi on Numbers

count, whether it is our money or the number of grandchildren we have. For G-d, what is most dear is the Jewish people so they merit counting.

It is important to note, however, that while G-d can count us, we cannot count ourselves. Our portion begins with G-d saying to Moses to speak to Israel take a census. It was not initiated by Moses but rather by G-d. In 1 Samuel, when King David decides to take a census of the Israelites, it brings about seven years of famine.<sup>2</sup> Why would this be the case? Perhaps because G-d's motivation for counting Israel is to delight in our growing numbers and in His chosen people whereas our motivation for counting might just be pride or curiosity. Therefore, we cannot be the ones to count.

In Parshat Shekalim, Israel was counted not by number of people but by the number of half shekels received. In other words, each person was counted by virtue of his/her contribution as opposed to by number. This demonstrated that our value is not just a number (ie I'm number 798 to be counted) but by what we brought to make G-d's home. Of

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Samuel 24

course, the numbering of people often has disastrous consequences, as we saw in the Shoah. We are so much more than a number: we are a person with unique talents and gifts to contribute to better humanity and the world.

We also do not count Jews during minyan. To ensure there are ten, we use a roundabout technique: reciting a biblical verse of ten words and ascribing to each person present one of those words. A common one is הושיעה את עמך וברך את נחלתך ורעם ונשאם עד עולם, “bring salvation to your nation and bless your inheritance rejoice and lift us up forever.”<sup>3</sup> By counting with this verse, we raise people’s spirits; that as we call out to G-d to save us so too are we saying that each person’s presence is lifting up our congregation.

We see some dangers in counting: the emphasis of quantity over quality, of numbers over people and their unique contributions.

However, we also see some opportunities: through counting ourselves and those around us we give hope that together we can make a strong,

unified impact as well as that each of us matters. It is in this spirit that I want to honor the accountants and all of the financial professionals here for this Shabbat. We greatly value the work that you do on a daily basis and the impact that you make in bettering our lives. Thank you for taking from your busy schedules to celebrate Shabbat with us. As we are on the eve of celebrating Shavuot and rejoicing in the giving of the Torah, we pray that with your guidance and expertise we can find the joy in each and every moment of life.