

The Torah Portions They Never Told Us About  
The Census  
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- A) The census in the Book of Bmidbar
- 1) Sefer Bmidbar, chapter 1, verses 1 – 5a, 17 – 21, 23, 25, 27, 44 – 46
  - 2) Sefer Bmidbar, chapter 26, verses 1 – 7, 14, 18, 51 – 56
    - a Note the wording in the command, in both places – שאו את ראש כל עדת בני ישראל – literally meaning to raise or lift up the head of each member of the congregation of Israel.
- B) Reasons for the census and for repeating it – the straightforward meaning
- 1) The first census is for the organization of the camp for the march through the desert, and perhaps also for the organization of the fighting force for when they reach the land.
  - 2) The second census comes after 38 years of wandering in the desert. If the original census was for military purposes, it must be now redone, and there is now the additional need of counting the tribes in order to apportion the land.
- C) Reasons offered by the medieval commentators
- a Rashbam, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> explanations of the Ramban – technical/functional reasons, as above.
  - b Rashi, 1<sup>st</sup> explanation of Ramban, Rav Yitzchak Arama – spiritual/psychological reason.
  - c Two completely different types of counting. The latter would not even be called a census in our language, but might be more akin to a public reception line, or a ceremony of conferring or recognition of citizenship. The people were not merely made into a number, rather their names were recorded.
  - d Why do some of the commentators stray from what might appear to be the simple meaning of the text?
    - i The unique language used here שאו את ראש כל עדת בני ישראל – Lift up the head of all of the congregation of the Children of Israel.
    - ii The emphasis on the individual and his name.
    - iii A real reticence concerning regular counting as per the verses we will see below. It is hard for these commentators to believe that God would have the people counted for mundane, technical reasons.
- D) Sefer Shemuel Bet, chapter 24
- a King David did exactly what God had twice ordered Moshe in the Book of Bmidbar: What did he do wrong?
  - b Yoav seems to have known that it is forbidden to take a census of the people (verse 3); David also seems to have known (verses 10 -11): How did they know?
  - c Why were the offerings of King David effective in staying the plague?
- E) Sefer Shmot, chapter 30, verses 11 – 16; chapter 38, verses 25 – 26
- 1) This is the only possible textual Torah source for a prohibition to count the people. It could very well be teaching that there is a biblical prohibition for all times against taking a direct census that counts the people; rather objects must be counted instead (Rashi).
  - 2) These verses however, could have been understood in a number of different ways.
    - a There was a one-time commandment to take a census through the collection of half shekels, and nothing can be learned from it for the future. It could have been as atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf. (According to the Ramban, this is what King David mistakenly thought.)

- b There was a one-time commandment (Rashbam) or there is a commandment once a year for all time (Rambam) to collect money for the Tabernacle/Temple by way of a half shekel from each Jew.
- F) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate 62b
  - 1) All three of our original questions are answered by this approach
  - 2) This passage understands that there is a standing biblical prohibition against counting the Jewish People
- G) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yoma page 22b
  - 1) Does not refer to the verses in Shmot. Apparently they are not understood as teaching a prohibition against directly counting people.
  - 2) Does not make any reference to the verses about King David. Apparently the sin there was not one of counting people.
  - 3) There is a prohibition against counting people, but its' source is not in the Torah.
- H) A different understanding of King David's sin
  - 1) David did not violate any specific text or commandment, but rather transgressed the overarching biblical meta-value – humility. He counted the people out of hubris and arrogance. (Ralbag, Abarbanel)
  - 2) David counted the people as part of his militarism and his desire to muster the army for unnecessary imperialistic wars. Just as God punished him for shedding much blood by preventing him from building the Temple, so was he censured for this prelude to further bloodshed. (Ho'eel Moshe brought in Daat Mikra on Shmuel)
- I) Rationale for the prohibition of taking a census or counting Jews.
  - 1) Pride and hubris. The source of the prohibition is both in the text of Shmot and in the meta-value of humility.
  - 2) It demeans people by turning them into mere numbers.
  - 3) It brings scrutiny on the individual – Ayin haRa (Malbim, Rashi).
- J) Back to our parsha: Why was it permitted to count the Jewish People.
  - 1) Because they were not counting people as numbers, but as individuals (as we saw in Ramban above)
  - 2) Perhaps just because God said to do so (Abarbanel).
  - 3) Perhaps because they actually did so by way of counting objects and not people (Rashi).
  - 4) Perhaps because it had a practical purpose.
- K) Practical Halacha
  - 1) Counting people for a minyan or a vote
  - 2) A word about the modern census
- L) Mei haShiloach and Beit Ya'acov

See also

קיצור שלחן ערוך, סימן ט"ו, אות ג'