

TORAH
OF
Reconciliation

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BAMIDBAR במדבר

(Numbers 1:1-4:20)

Everyone Counts

And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: "Take the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, by their polls...." (Numbers 1:1-2)

"On the first day of the second month": Out of love for them, He counted them every so often. When they left Egypt, He counted them. When [some of them] fell at [the time of the golden] calf, He counted them in order to know how many survived. When He was about to bring His Presence upon them, he counted them. On the first of [the month of] Nissan, the Tabernacle was erected, and on the first of [the month of] Iyar, he counted them. (Rashi, Numbers 1:1-2)

"Take the sum": Every Israelite man was cared for in detail and even one of them was seen as important as an entire nation, as it is written: "And a master will fall from among them" (Exodus 19:21), for even if one of them will fall, it is as though a "master" [has fallen]. Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, gave them a number like the stars about which it is said: "He brings their hosts out with a [specific] number; He called all of them by name" (Isaiah 40:26) in order to teach that those who bring righteous merit to the multitudes are always like the stars. And every one of them has personal protection. (Kli Yakar, Numbers 1:2)

The long lists of names and numbers here as elsewhere do not make for compelling reading. Yet Rashi and the Kli Yakar attribute a special reason for devoting sacred text to such detail. Everyone is holy before God. The people are not one undifferentiated mass, but rather composed of precious individuals. Individuals matter before God. Thus their names and their specific numbers are critical. The census reveals God's caring for each person. They are compared to the stars, each bearing a name, each adding its beauty to the heavens, each a source of light, each having lasting value.

It is true that this census is limited in scope: it included only males of military age. From a modernist perspective, it falls short. Yet it still carries the core teaching that the destiny of one people does not preclude holding on to the supreme value of every individual. Inclusivity in the count would be enlarged as the tradition unfolded.