



We Are Each Pearls: The Impossibility of Counting

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The numbers in recent headlines can be both dizzying and traumatizing. As we collectively watch the figures of those suffering from the coronavirus increase week after week, our ability to make sense of these extraordinary statistics diminishes. How can we possibly relate to the humanity contained within a number like 4,000,000?

This week's *parashah* provides a window into how we might answer this question. The fourth book of the Torah, BeMidbar, begins with a census of the Israelites of military age. In his commentary, Rashi immediately raises an implicit question of why this census was necessary—after all, the Israelites' numbers have already been cited multiple times since the Exodus—and offers the following as explanation:

רש"י על במדבר א:א

מתוך חֲבֵתָן לְפָנָיו מוֹנֶה אוֹתָם כָּל שָׁעָה.

Rashi's comments to BeMidbar 1:1

Since they were beloved to Him, He counted them frequently.

Rashi's claim that the origin of the census is in love is reflected in textual clues throughout the *parashah*. That the census is important to the Torah's narrative is apparent from the sheer amount of space devoted to it (54 verses!). Moreover, this census is not only an administrative task, but is undertaken at the command of HaShem, as is emphasized in the final verse of the opening chapter:

במדבר א:נד

וַיַּעַשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת־מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל עֲשׂוֹ:



BeMidbar 1:54

The Israelites did accordingly; just as God commanded Moses, so they did.

Given the opening chapter in BeMidbar, it is all the more striking that a later census in Tanakh is regarded as a major transgression of the divine will. The final chapter of 2 Shmuel records a census undertaken by King David, which is punished by a plague that kills 70,000 Israelites. It begs the question: what differentiates the census in our *parashah* from the census for which David is severely punished?

Already in the first verse of 2 Shmuel 24 we are given an ominous clue.

שמואל ב כד:א

וַיִּסָּף אֶף־ה' לַחֲרוֹת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסֹּת אֶת־דָּוִד בְּהֶם לֵאמֹר לָךְ מִנֵּה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־יְהוּדָה:

2 Shmuel 24:1

The anger of God again flared up against Israel; and He moved David against them, saying, “Go count Israel and Judah.”

This is a census rooted not in love as in the BeMidbar census, but in *anger*. The stated purpose David offers to his military commander Yoav is that the counting of his subjects is purely for his own sake: “so I may know the number of the people” (verse 2).

The motivation of the census leads each to be conducted in starkly different manners. In BeMidbar, the instruction is detailed as followed:

במדבר א:ב

שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עֵדֶת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם בְּמִסְפָּר שְׁמוֹת כָּל־זָכָר לְגִלְגָּלָתָם:

BeMidbar 1:2

Take the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel by their families, according to their fathers' houses; a numbering of their names, a head count of every male.

The Israelites are not only to be counted numerically, but also identified as part of their broader family and tribe. Each tribe had a representative who helped oversee the census, and the Torah dedicates twelve verses to naming each of them. Contrast these detailed instructions with David's directive to Yoav:

שמואל ב כד:ב

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־יֹאבָב שֶׁר־הַחַיִּל אֲשֶׁר־אִתּוֹ שׁוּט־נָא בְּכָל־שִׁבְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִדָּן וְעַד־בְּאֵר שָׁבַע וּפְקֹדוּ אֶת־הָעָם וַיַּדְעֹתִי אֶת מִסְפָּר הָעָם



2 Shmuel 24:2

The king said to Yoav, the minister of his army, “Go now through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Be’ersheva, and take a census of the people, so that I may know the number of the people.”

Ultimately, David is only interested in a number. There is no mention of noting families or tribes, nor there is a representative from each tribe as in BeMidbar. It is a census entirely for the benefit of the king, overseen entirely by his officers, and he is disinterested in any information beyond the number of his subjects. Whereas the census in BeMidbar yields detailed information regarding the size of each tribe, Yoav reports to David only two numbers—the populations of Judah and Israel, far less specific than in our *parashah*.

The two cases also differ in their consequences. Immediately after Yoav reports these numbers, David realizes he has made a tremendous mistake:

שמואל ב כד:י

וַיָּהֲלֹךְ דָּוִד אֶת־אֶחָיוֹ אֶחָד־בְּכָל־שִׁבְטֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל (ס) וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל־ה' חָטָאתִי מְאֹד אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי וְעַתָּה ה' הָעֹבֵר־נָא אֶת־עוֹן עַבְדְּךָ כִּי נִסְכַּלְתִּי מְאֹד:

2 Shmuel 24:10

And David’s heart smote him after he had numbered the people. And David said to God, “I have sinned grievously in what I have done. Please, God, remit the guilt of Your servant, for I have acted foolishly.”

Conducting a census through love calls for seeing each individual as not only a number or subject, but as a unique personality in relationship with other people. This element is what gets captured in the 54 verses of our *parashah*’s census but is lost when David decides to count the people for his own aggrandizement. The folly of reducing human beings to a number is what dooms David’s census from its inception and leads to a harsh punishment later in the chapter.¹

Seemingly, it is this reduction of human beings to something less-than-human which underlies the prohibition of counting people—treated as a severe transgression in the Talmud. When citing the prohibition of counting Jews, the Talmud suggests that one who does so is in violation of two biblical prohibitions (Yoma 22b). Elsewhere (in Berakhot 62b), the Talmud states that David’s transgression is such an obvious sin that

¹ Presumably, Yoav understands this straightaway, which is why his immediate reaction to David’s command is to urge David to reconsider.



even schoolchildren (“*tinokot shel beit raban*”) are aware not to count people.² The unmistakable nature of this transgression is reinforced by the account of 2 Shmuel 24 in that Yoav questions David’s motive immediately after he is asked to conduct the census, and that David realizes he has sinned *before* God speaks to the prophet Gad and says as much.

Clearly something essential is liable to be lost when human beings are counted, and yet the Torah records various countings undertaken by human beings, such as in this week’s *parashah*. How can this be? The Talmud in tractate Yoma provides us with crucial insight into this question.

תלמוד בבלי יומא כב:

אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני: ר' יונתן רמי. כתיב "והיה מספר בני ישראל כחול הים" (הושע ב:א), וכתוב "אשר לא ימד ולא יספר" (שם)...
רבי אמר משום אבא יוסי בן דוסתאי: לא קשיא, כאן בידי אדם כאן בידי שמים.

Talmud Bavli Yoma 22b

R. Shmuel bar Nahmani said: R. Yonatan raised a contradiction. It is written: “And the number of the children of Israel will be like the sand of the sea” (Hoshea 2:1) [implying their numbers can be counted]. On the other hand, it also says [later in the same verse]: “Which cannot be measured and cannot be counted,” [implying their numbers will not be countable at all]...

Rabbi said in the name of Abba Yosei b. Dostai: Resolving this contradiction is not difficult—here it refers to counting by the hands of human beings; there, it refers to counting by the hand of God.

The Talmud is perplexed by the seeming contradiction about whether the number of Israelites can be determined. One resolution is that while God is able to count the specific number of Israelites, human beings do not have that capacity. Seemingly, the Talmud is not speaking about the *ability* to count—surely human beings, even throughout the Torah, record censuses regularly. What then is suggested by this resolution?

Perhaps the Talmud is suggesting that any time humans attempt to quantify very large groups of human beings, something gets *lost*. It is simply impossible to fully capture an individual’s humanity when one places said individual into a larger group. Preserving this humanity can only be accomplished in a counting undertaken by God.

² The Talmud cites the verse in Shemot 30:12 as a support, which describes the census taken of the Israelites in the wilderness through each person contributing a half-*shekel* instead of there being a numerical count.



This is why *halakhah* goes to great lengths to limit how and when people are counted. Even if a census is correct in a mathematical sense—and there is no indication in 2 Shmuel 24 that David’s census yielded an inaccurate number—there is still something essential missed in the final tally.

The lesson of the BeMidbar census is that human life cannot ever be reduced to numbers.³ While it is true that large groups of people may need to be counted at times—*inevitably* resulting in a loss of individual humanity—there are things we can do to preserve as much humanity as possible in the process. For example, the process can be done with love and care, as the first Rashi in the *parashah* highlights. We can account for familial and tribal relationships, and not just for bodies. It can be done in a way which signals—to both the counters and to the ones being counted—that each person is created in the image of the Divine, and not merely a number.

As of this writing, there have been millions of confirmed cases of COVID-19 throughout the world. Hundreds of thousands of people have died from the virus. These are staggering numbers that we are simply unable to comprehend. As the Gemara in Yoma suggests, adequately capturing the meaning of so many lives is a task that only God can do. And yet, our headlines contain numbers in the hundreds of thousands and in the millions because our current context calls for it.

When responding to the impossibilities posed by this pandemic, our *parashah* teaches us that we must do so with care and affection, accounting for the humanity of each individual being counted to the best of our ability. Ultimately, fully realizing this task is impossible for human beings, the Talmud recognizes there is simply no way we can fully capture the uniqueness of individuals in a number like 4,000,000. Yet we must try, even as we recognize that our ability to do so is out of our control. Our task is to continue asking ourselves how we can aspire to relate to these numbers as God does, seeing the individuals hidden by them as best we can. To ask: *How can I look at these statistics and also see individual human beings, families, and relationships? Where may there be space for me to honor the infinite value of a human life? Whose humanity is most in need of being affirmed in this moment?*

A *midrash* (on a verse later in the *parashah*) compares this divinely ordained census to the counting of precious pearls:

³ For another interpretation along these lines, see Shai Held, “Divine Love and Human Uniqueness,” available here: www.hadar.org/torah-resource/divine-love-and-human-uniqueness.



במדבר רבה ד:ב

משל לאדם... והיה לו פרגמטיס אחת של מרגליות נאות והיה נוטלה ומוציאה במנין ומניחה במנין... אתם בני... לכה מונה אתכם בכל שעה.

BeMidbar Rabbah 4:2

A parable of a person... who had a collection of beautiful pearls, and he would count them each time he took them out and put them away... [Similarly, God says to Israel,] “You are my children... and therefore I count you often.”⁴

This is the lesson of the divinely ordained census. Even in the face of staggering numbers which threaten to reduce our uniqueness to a statistic, we are each pearls.

⁴ While this *midrash* offers a beautiful image of the preciousness of human life, one should note that it carries a particularistic framing.

