

The Limits of Numbers

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The fourth book of Torah, Bemidbar (“in the desert”) is a narrative of the forty year exodus journey, with its repeated failures. It is also called Humash HaPekudim (the Book of Counting) in rabbinic literature.¹ It starts with a census of the Jews who left Egypt and subsequently died in the wilderness. It closes with a count of the next generation which grew up during the trek and is poised to enter the land of Canaan.

The opening census is surprising. The Torah already reported the number of Jews departing Egypt as around 600,000, not counting children (Exodus 12:36). Bemidbar’s narrative starts only twelve and a half months later.² Why count again so soon?

Counting Jews can be a dangerous business. At the end of the Second Book of Samuel we are told that King David ordered a census by direct people count and that brought the punishment of a plague on the Israelites (II Samuel 30). In contrast, in the census conducted after the terrible breach of the covenant in the incident of the Golden Calf, Moses specifically

¹ See, for example, Babylonian Talmud Yoma 68b.

² The Israelite Exodus occurred on the 15th day of Nissan, the first month in the first year of their leaving. Moses and Aaron are instructed to count on “the first day of the second month in the second year of their leaving Egypt” (Numbers 1:1).



did not count people directly. Rather, each and every adult person was asked to give a half *shekel* coin. The coins were then counted to arrive at the actual population number (Exodus 30:11-16). As a result of this census, there was no punishment at all.

Similarly, when trying to establish whether a *minyán* was present so that prayer service could include “*devarim shebikdushah* / matters of special holiness,”³ popular Jewish traditional culture sensed this objection and avoided counting individuals in synagogue. Instead of enumerating individuals, people would recite a 10 word verse, applying each word to an individual present. E.g. *Hoshiah* (1) *et* (2) *amekha* (3) *uvareikh* (4) *et* (5) *nahalatekha* (6) *ur’eim* (7) *venas’eim* (8) *ad* (9) *ha’olam* (10).⁴ Even more famously, people would establish the presence of a *minyán* by counting: “not-1, not-2, not-3...” until getting to “not-10.”

Why is there a negative attitude toward direct counting of people? There is actually a substantive theological issue involved. The human being is an image of God. This means that each individual is of infinite value, equal and unique.⁵ Counting an individual implies that we have “delimited” the person, we have established their parameters and can classify them by common characteristics as if all people are one type. We can now add one to another in the category of population registry. We should be forever exploring this unlimited dignity and never reach its limit enough to then lump the person with others as if they were similar units.

Furthermore, such a count constitutes a kind of denial of people’s uniqueness. For the purposes of the census we bracket the infinite values and hold the uniqueness, while we agglomerate all the people. This is useful for administration, taxation, and other services.

³ These include such prayers as the Berekhu and the Kedushah.

⁴ “Save your people, bless your inheritance, shepherd, carry them forever” (Psalm 28:9).

⁵ See my book, *The Triumph of Life*, (forthcoming), chapter 2.



While we justify the count for utilitarian reasons, this process is an encroachment on the most fundamental dignities with which God has endowed all humans.⁶

This avoidance of counting may sound like folk superstition or playful exaggeration. But in the Holocaust, the Nazis grasped that turning people into numbers alone was a way of degrading and devaluing them. The acme of dehumanization in the Holocaust was achieved by turning the prisoners in Auschwitz and other concentration camps into numbers. Once the number was tattooed on them, prisoners and guards were punished if they called people by their actual name, for this would honor their dignity and value. Numbering expressed their non-value, their facelessness, their dispensability—to be replaced by yet another less-than-human number prisoner.⁷

Why then did Moses and Aaron count the Jews again at the beginning of the actual trek through the desert? I submit that for the two leaders this was a celebration of the Exodus and an expression of triumphalism at liberating so many people from slavery. One can imagine the exhilaration Moses and Aaron felt when they added up and found the total number of Israelites to be 603,550(!)—not even counting the Levites (Numbers 2:32). Consider that when Jacob's family came down to Egypt it comprised a total of seventy people—including Joseph

⁶ Compare Rabbi Akiva's statement in Mishnah Avot 3:14.

⁷ A census or any government counting is not to be compared to the Nazi policies in any way. I denounce the meretricious use of Nazi analogies to oppose the government restrictions during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Such debasing language is outrageous and a cheapening/demeaning of the horror of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, we should be alert that all counting or objectification of human beings impinges somewhat on their dignity. Such steps can be turned by evil people into grave assaults on human value.



and his family already there (Genesis 46:27). For the two brothers, the census was the exclamation point on a demographic explosive growth by the children of Israel.⁸

This amazing result also illuminates the sad implications of the second census at the end of the book of Numbers. Moses and Aaron undoubtedly projected that the remarkable growth of the Israelites would continue and that they would soon reach the ideal numbers promised to Abraham when he became a Jew: “...count the stars—if you are able to number them—so shall your seed be [numerous]” (Genesis 15:5). In fact, the final count showed a total of 601,730 (Numbers 26:51)—that is essentially zero population growth. The leadership failed to see that projecting present trends indefinitely in the future frequently leads to grave distortions and unanticipated outcomes. This is a classic problem of Wall Street analysis. A company grows initially and quickly—so its development is projected *ad infinitum*. The annals of bankruptcy are littered with the bones of super stocks that were flash-in-the-pan.

Moses’ and Aaron’s second error was failure to factor in the **quality** dimension of people. It’s true that size does matter. Larger numbers of Israelites would support more projects and capabilities and promised a large fighting force that could quickly conquer the Land of Canaan. However, Moses and Aaron failed to see that the Exodus generation was fatally flawed with a slave mentality. People were afraid of making independent judgments for which they would have to put their lives on the line. Unlike free people, they were unprepared to take on high risks for which they had no guarantee of success. Hence the Israelites balked and panicked at the idea of entering into Canaan directly and conquering a

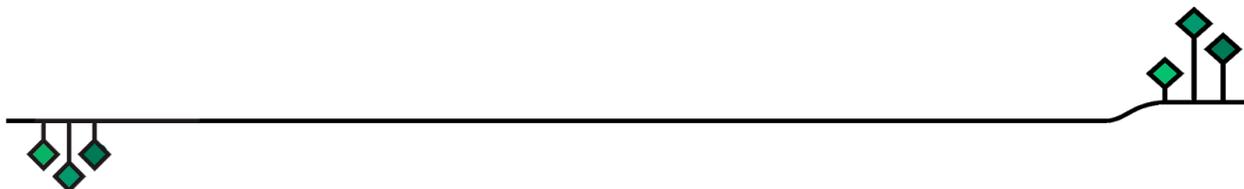
⁸ One can guess that the quantum growth in numbers was achieved in part by other enslaved groups joining the Israelites’ exodus under cover of the panic and breakdown of the Egyptians’ mastery. This so-called *erev rav* / “mixed multitude” proved to be undigested culturally and religiously and a source of religious rebellion and violation of discipline. See the traditional commentators on Numbers 11:4.



homeland (Numbers 13-14). Imbued with the psychology of slaves they were thrown by unexpected difficulties or fazed by being faced with new routines. They withdrew into themselves or sat and grumbled when there were shortages of water, or less than tasty food supplies or any out of the ordinary requirements. Not only did the Exodus generation not thrive in the wilderness, they were out of sorts most of the time. They took on fewer tasks. They had smaller families. In the end, they accomplished little of the grand plans that the leadership had in mind. By the end, Moses and Aaron were burned out. Only a new generation and new leadership could consummate the dreams and plans of the Exodus cohort.

The sad paradox of the book of Numbers is that a whole generation died out and a new generation was born and raised—but Jewish life basically marched in place. In the end, the numbers misled or maybe, I should say, led to nowhere. In his summary of his life, Moses said that the Jewish people was about quality, not numbers: “The Lord did not desire to love you or choose you because you were numerous, for you are among the fewest of all the nations” (Deuteronomy 7:7).

To this day, the Jewish impact on world civilization has not been by the numbers. Christianity and Islam became the monotheistic mass religions that conquered the world. In secular realms, Jews have had extraordinary impact on modern and post-modern civilization due to the remarkable achievements of a small number of quality individuals who reshaped understanding of the world or reimagined whole fields of human activities—in business, science, and culture. The Jewish state, Israel, is similarly disproportionately influential to its size and numbers. It has transformed deserts into green and modeled the absorption of



immigrants from all over the world. Its technological innovation in the field of medicine saves not only the lives of Israelis but is advancing positive health outcomes across the globe.

I do not intend here to dismiss quantitative analysis or deny the importance of demography. It is true that the future of the Jewish communities in the Diaspora is in danger due to low birth rates and high assimilation rates. Quantitative studies and analysis are needed to detect weaknesses and assess what aspects of Jewish life and culture are working and which are not. Nevertheless, the future of Judaism is dependent on developing a higher **quality** content of the Jewish way of living, one able to flourish and attract people in the presence of one of the most advanced and attractive civilizations of all time. Counting only gives us part of the story.

It is also critical that Jewish culture and religion absorb and integrate some of the profound insights and breakthroughs of the general culture. The Jewish way must be articulated in the language of the current high civilization. This means that the present massive sector of Jewish life, occupied by Orthodox and traditional Judaism, will have to widen its ideas and reformulate its values in a manner more respectful of the general culture and more illuminated by those best insights. The more progressive religions and the secular streams will have to reinforce their informal Jewish structures and values to assure their continuing distinctiveness in the midst of integration. The Pew research study of American Jewry suggests that the liberal streams which numerically dominate American Jewish life are heading for a demographic crash unless they step up the intensity and quality of their Jewish life.⁹

⁹ See the summary and analysis of this 2013 report here: <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>, and the just published report here: <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>.



The key to a successful assurance of Judaism's future in post-modern civilization will be the development of a core population that is steeped in Jewish memory and values in a manner so internalized and freely chosen that it thrives in the presence of dynamic other religions and cultures. Aaron and Moses failed in their attempts to upgrade the quality of the exodus generation's Jewish life. We cannot afford to fail. This is where our communal investments and special efforts should be focused now.

