



How to Read a Census

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For my mother's 75th birthday, we surprised her by taking her to visit her mother's childhood home. I knew my grandmother had grown up in Los Angeles, but I didn't know exactly where, and there were no living relatives whom I could ask. So I did what anyone seeking information does these days: I Googled my grandmother's name, hoping something would pop up. That modern technology led me to an ancient one: the census. I found online copies of the first two censuses taken in my grandmother's lifetime, one when she was 4½ and the next one when she was 15.¹ The second one was the jackpot: I found an address.

But I also noticed that something had changed between the two records. There was one fewer member of the house. My grandmother's father was no longer listed. He hadn't died—I could Google that information too—he was simply gone. This confirmed a family story I'd overheard but never spoken about with my grandmother: that her father had run out on the family when she was 11 and she had never spoken to him again. There it was, in black and white, a tragic tale between the lines. It's amazing what you can learn from reading a census, if you know what to look for.

¹ The Enumeration Clause (in Article I, Section 2, Clause 3 of the United States Constitution) mandates the taking of a census every 10 years.



There are several tragic tales hidden between the lines of the census in Parashat Pinchas as well. It is the second census of the Book of Numbers and from the beginning, this one is framed with a particular theme:

במדבר כו:א-ב

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַמִּגָּפָה

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן לֵאמֹר. שְׂאוּ אֶת רֹאשׁ כָּל עֵדֻת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Numbers 26:1-2

It was **after the plague**

and the Eternal said to Moshe and to Elazar son of Aharon the priest: “Take a census of the whole Israelite company.”

Indeed, the last thing we read in Parashat Balak was that 24,000 people had died in a plague as a punishment for their worship of Ba'al Peor. Parashat Pinchas then opens with a verse that, by scribal tradition,² leaves the first three words hanging over the rest of the verse like a headline: “After the plague.” This census, it seems, will be a death register.

We should not be surprised, then, when the census begins to deviate from its rigid numerical script to highlight other notable deaths. After the first tribe, Reuven, is counted (numbering 43,730) the Torah begins to name some of the founding fathers of that tribe, and then pauses to remind us of the untimely demise suffered by two of them:

² This is known as a פסקא באמצע פסוק (*piska be-emtza pasuk*), a break in the middle of the verse. Such breaks are not uncommon in our scribal tradition between verses, marking one section from another. But this is one of only three such breaks in the Torah that come in the middle of a verse. The other two are in Genesis 35:22 and Deuteronomy 2:8.



במדבר כו:ט-י

וּבְנֵי אֱלִיָּאב נְמוּאֵל וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם הוּא דָתָן וְאַבִּירָם קִרְיָאִי הָעֵדָה אֲשֶׁר הָצוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אַהֲרֹן בְּעֵדַת קֹרַח
בְּהִצָּתָם עַל ה'. וַתִּפָּתַח הָאֲרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם וְאֶת-קֹרַח בְּמוֹת הָעֵדָה בֹּאֲכָל הָאִשׁ אֶת חֲמִשִּׁים
וּמֵאֲנִים אִישׁ וַיְהִיו לְנֶס.

Numbers 26:9-10

The sons of Eliav were Nemuel, and Datan and Aviram. These are the same Datan and Aviram, chosen in the assembly, who agitated against Moshe and Aharon as part of Korah's band when they agitated against the Eternal. Then the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with Korah—when that band died, when the fire consumed the 250 men—and they became an example.

If we have been reading through the cycle of the *parshiyyot*, we know this story. We saw it in full just two weeks ago, in the central drama of Parashat Korah. But this brief recap doesn't fit the genre of a census. The narrative insertion suggests that this census will be about more than just numbers. It will also take time to record some of the terrible losses that have befallen the tribes along the way.

With the census' next sidenote, however, we are reminded of deaths that came much earlier. As the tribe of Yehudah is listed, we begin with this verse:

במדבר כו:יט

בְּנֵי יְהוּדָה עֵר וֹנָן וַיָּמָת עֵר וְאֹנָן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן.

Numbers 26:19

The sons of Yehudah: Er and Onan. And Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan.

This story takes us back to Book of Genesis, chapter 28, where we read that Yehudah married his eldest son to Tamar, but Er was “wicked in the eyes of the Eternal,” and was killed by God. Then Yehudah tells his second son, Onan, to marry his brother’s widow, but Onan, too, displeases God and is killed.

There are some striking parallels between this narrative exposition and the last one. Again the census pauses to mark two exceptional deaths. Again they are two brothers who died by the hand of God. But these deaths happened much further back in history. Why are they mentioned here? Er and Onan have nothing to do with the desert journey—they never even made it down to Egypt. This census seems intent on highlighting great family tragedies, even if it has to reach back into another era to do so.

With these two stories of sibling death in place, we are well-prepared to anticipate what will be added when we come to the tribe of Levi, and begin to list the children of Aharon:

במדבר כו:ס-סא

וַיֵּלֶד לְאַהֲרֹן אֶת נָדָב וְאֶת אֲבִיהוּא אֶת אֶלְעָזָר וְאֶת אִיתָמָר. וַיָּמָת נָדָב וְאֲבִיהוּא בְּהִקְרִיבָם אֵשׁ זָרָה לַפָּנִי
ה'.

Numbers 26:60-61

Born to Aharon were: Nadav and Avihu, Elazar and Itamar. And Nadav and Avihu died when they offered strange fire before the Eternal.

Yet another narrative aside to note another set of deaths that fit the template we have been tracing so far: two brothers who died under extraordinary circumstances. By now a pattern has been firmly established. The census is signaling something to us. What is the meaning of this recurring callback to doubled deaths?



The case of Nadav and Avihu's deaths can serve as a key to understanding the others, for it has already had a recurrence of its own. Their deaths are first described in Leviticus 10, but we have seen mention of them several times since then.

The first callback comes several chapters later in Leviticus, when a whole *parashah* is named for its opening mention of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu:

ויקרא טז:א

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי ה' וַיָּמָתוּ.

Leviticus 16:1

The Eternal spoke to Moshe **after the death**³ of the two sons of Aharon who died when they drew too close to the presence of the Eternal.

When we come to the Book of Numbers, these deaths are mentioned again right away, already in the book's first census:

במדבר ג:ג-ד

אֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֲנִים הַמְּשֻׁחִים אֲשֶׁר מָלֵא יָדָם לְכַהֵן. וַיָּמָת נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא לִפְנֵי ה' בְּהִקְרָבָם אֵשׁ זָרָה לִפְנֵי ה' בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי וּבָנִים לֹא הָיוּ לָהֶם.

Numbers 3:3-4

These are the names of the sons of Aharon, the anointed priests, who were ordained for priesthood. And Nadav and Avihu died by the will of the Eternal, when they offered a strange fire before the Eternal in the wilderness of Sinai; and they left no sons.

³ Note how that titular phrasing, אחרי מות (*aharei mot*), is echoed by the opening phrase of our *parashah*'s census: אחרי המגפה (*aharei ha-mageifah*).



When they are mentioned again in the census in our *parashah*, it is the fourth time the Torah has highlighted their deaths. A *midrash* in Bemidbar Rabbah notes the pattern and offers this explanation:

במדבר רבה ב:כג

בְּכִמָּה מְקוֹמוֹת נִכְתְּבָה מִיתַת נָדָב וָאֲבִיהוּא מְלִמֵּד שֶׁהִיא צָעַר לִפְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם עֲלֵיהֶם.

Bemidbar Rabbah 2:23

The deaths of Nadav and Avihu are recorded in several places, to teach that God was in pain over their deaths.

These two deaths became the paradigm of exceptional loss because they were so prominent and so shocking: two sons of the High Priest died on the same day, in front of the entire congregation, in a great conflagration. When the Torah (Leviticus 10:3) records Aharon's stunned silence (וַיִּדָּם אַהֲרֹן) we can feel his pain, as the whole congregation must have that day.

The census in Parashat Pinḥas picks up on the recurring mention of Nadav and Avihu's deaths, and then strings it together with two other cases of sibling death, in order to remind us that extraordinary losses have happened before, and continued to happen afterwards.

Exceptional loss itself, then, is not an exception, but a norm. In the long history of the tribes of Israel, most families have suffered a great loss. Not all of them have been as noticeable, but they have all been tragedies.

The shocking phenomenon of two simultaneous deaths in one family grabs our attention and forces an awareness of the painful experience of personal loss that we sometimes tune out when we hear about death. When one person dies, we may overlook it as an inevitable



feature of human life. When thousands of people die, the tragedy is so massive, we tend to lose sight of the individual identities as we struggle to wrap our minds around the total loss.

That is the circumstance the people of Israel find themselves in as the census begins in Parashat Pinchas. 24,000 people have just perished from a plague. Everyone must have known someone who died that day. It would be easy for the Torah to treat this as a mass, impersonal catastrophe, to simply add up the death toll and move on. Instead, this census highlights a pattern of individual family losses and weaves it through the record of the whole people of Israel, in order to wake us up to the phenomenon of loss that affects every family. Just as God was in pain over the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, so God is in pain over every single death, and so should we be.

When I saw my grandmother's name in that 1930 census—listed alongside her mother, her sister, but not her father—I felt some of the pain that she must have carried, silently, through the years. As I looked further down the page at all the names listed, I wondered what other stories were hidden in those households. They had first appeared to me as a just page of just names and numbers. But now I could see the census before me as a collection of real human lives, full of hope and despair, struggling through the Great Depression, trying desperately—as our ancestors have always done—to keep their children alive. We are the living testament to their successes.

