



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Bamidbar

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Bamidbar

Are You Indispensable?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

In a world of 7 billion people and trillions of organisms and cells, what value can a single person possibly have? Are we negligible and insignificant creatures?

This week we read the first portion of the Book of Numbers, which begins with a census of the Jewish people. And immediately we are compelled to ask: Why is it so important to count the people, especially considering that God, in His all-encompassing knowledge, knows their precise number?!

And why does the Torah relate that the census was done only of individuals “from the age of twenty and up who were fit to serve in the army?”

The answer to these questions reveals for us a critical lesson about the value of every human life that is especially relevant today, in our highly technological and depersonalized world.

The power of being counted and being counted upon is particularly potent in our times. With all the upheavals shaking up the world today, it is very easy to succumb to a feeling of powerlessness and insignificance in face of all the overwhelming forces swirling around us.

In time of war when human worth is questioned and individual indispensability is challenged, then it is especially necessary to emphasize and focus the power of everyone’s inherent value.

We as Jews should know this well. Israel has always been willing to swap hundreds of terrorists for one Jewish hostage. As so vividly captured in the story of Gilad Shalit several years ago: How much effort and time had been invested in order to finally free this single Israeli soldier?!

In a hostile environment, in an insecure world – where people threaten and feel threatened by each other – there especially we need to count each individual. We need to declare: “Don’t allow yourself to be depersonalized. You matter, you count, you are absolutely necessary.”

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS: ARE YOU INDISPENSIBLE?

1. Math Exam (Humor)

At Penn State University, four sophomores majoring in mathematics – all “A” students – decided to party the weekend before finals. They visited friends a distance away and had a great time but, after all the hearty partying, they made it back to school tired and hung over.

Rather than taking the finals in that state, they opted to miss the exam and request a make-up. When they showed up in class, they claimed that they had not arrived back in time for the exam because they’d had a flat tire. The professor agreed they could make up the final the next day. Happy with the outcome, the fellows prepared that night as they should have in the first place.

The next day the professor placed them in separate rooms and gave them each a test booklet. They quickly answered the first set of problems worth 5 points. Cool, they thought, this is going to be easy.

And then they turned the page, where it was written:

“For 95 points: Which tire?”

2. Getting It Right (Joke)

Jack, fresh out of accounting school, goes to an interview for a well paying job. The company boss asks various questions about him and his education, but then throws at him a simple math problem, “What is three times seven?”

“Twenty-two,” Jack replies.

After he leaves, he double-checks it on his calculator (berating himself for not taking it to the interview) and realizes that he will not get the job.

However, about two weeks later, he gets a letter that surprisingly informs me he was hired. He is not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, but he was still very curious.

The next day, he goes in and asks: “How come I was hired, even though I got such a simple question wrong?”

The boss shrugs, “Well, out of all the candidates, you were the closest.”

That will introduce the subject of this week’s Torah reading ... math.

3. Counting

This week we begin the Book of Numbers, and immediately the question arises: Why is an entire book called “Numbers”?

We might reason that it is because this book begins with the census of the Jewish people, and then later relates another census that is taken.¹

But this only carries over the question to the meaning of the census: Why is it so important to count the people, especially considering that God, in His all-encompassing knowledge, knows their precise number?!

¹ See Numbers, chapter 26.

4. Ten Censuses

Indeed, the Midrash² tells us that there have been a total of nine censuses:

- Once when the Children of Israel went down to Egypt.³
- A second time when they came out.⁴
- A third time after the incident of the Golden Calf.⁵
- The fourth and fifth times in the Book of Numbers – once in formation of the camps, and once in connection with the division of the land.
- The sixth and seventh times in the days of King Saul.⁶
- The eighth time in the days of King David.⁷
- The ninth time in the days of the Prophet Ezra.⁸
- And a tenth census is coming, according to the Prophet Jeremiah, in the Messianic Era, when “the flocks shall again pass under the hands of Him that counts them.”⁹

What is the great significance of counting the people? Why is it so important that a census was taken nine times in history – and one more will be taken in the Messianic Era, and so important that an entire book of Torah is called “Numbers”?

² Tanchuma Ki Tisa 9. Bamidbar Rabba 2:11.

³ Genesis 46:8-27.

⁴ Exodus 12:37.

⁵ Exodus 30:12.

⁶ I Samuel 11:8, 15:4.

⁷ II Samuel 24:9.

⁸ Ezra 2:64, Nehemiah 7:66.

⁹ Jeremiah 33:13.

5. Dear to God

Rashi, the classic 11th century biblical commentator, answers as follows:

Because the Jewish people are dear to God, He counts them *all the time*. He counted them when they left Egypt. He counted them after they fell in the wake of the sin of the Golden Calf, in order to know the number of the survivors. And He counted them when He came to manifest His presence within them: on the first of Nissan when the Sanctuary was erected, and [one month later] on the first of Iyar He counted them.

Nachmanides (Ramban) adds that the Hebrew word for “count” – *pakod* – also means to “remember” and “be concerned with.”

Counting people involves much more than a statistical census. For example, when teachers go on field trips with their students, they keep counting them to make sure no one is lost.

And God counts us for the same reason. This counting is not a mere technicality. It is about the inherent value God places on each person. It is a sign that he cherishes, recognizes and cares about each one of us – all the time.

6. Do I Matter?

Psychologically speaking, the single biggest question we ask ourselves is: Do I matter? Do I truly matter? Amidst the billions of people in the world, and the myriad of different species and forms of life, let alone the trillions upon trillions of atoms and cells – one cannot help but wonder: Do I count? Does it make any real difference whether I exist or not?

Subjectively, of course, each of us has value to the people around us. And we make do the best with what we have. Not to mention that our egos work overtime to make us feel that we are self-important. But in the grand scheme of things is each one of us truly indispensable?

No small question. Because if we are dispensable, how invested will we be in our choices? If we don't matter, then everything we do doesn't matter.

7. God Counts Us All

Comes the Book of Numbers to tell us: God counts each one of us. The greatest and the smallest are not more and not less than one unit. Because no one is optional, no one is dispensable.

There are three types of people: Those that can count, and those that can't.

You and you and you and you – and every individual on this earth – has a unique mission, an essential contribution to make that no one – NO ONE – else can accomplish but you!

And this inherent value is not just when the counting is done, but – to quote Rashi – “all the time.”

8. Why Twenty and Up?

So why does the Torah relate that the census was done only of individuals “from the age of twenty and up?” The stated reason is that these were all those who “who were fit to serve in the army,”¹⁰ so does that mean they were the only ones who mattered because they could defend the nation?

¹⁰Numbers 1:3.

No.

The truth is that every one of us counts from the moment of birth, throughout our entire lives (and beyond), but when individual indispensability is challenged and questioned – in time of war when human worth is questioned – then it is especially necessary to emphasize and focus the power of everyone’s inherent value.

A child born to healthy parents, who is nurtured and protected, is constantly made to feel that he or she matters. Loving parents imbue their child with confidence and a sense of absolute worth. As long as we are living in a sheltered and loving environment, our feeling of value and indispensability is intact and secure, with no need to be reminded of that fact through “counting.”

But then we grow up and we go out into the “battlefield” of life, where we encounter others who live by the cruel rule of “survival of the fittest.” In a hostile environment, in an insecure world – where people threaten and feel threatened by each other – there, especially, we need to count each individual.

When we begin to “serve in the army” and fight the battles of life, outside of the protection of our home and those that love us, it is very easy to lose confidence in our very own value and individuality. At this point when our worth is challenged we need to be counted and to hear: “Don’t ever forget that you are indispensable and always needed. No matter what enemy you face, no matter how society tries to force you to join the ranks of mob mentality, never allow yourself to be depersonalized. You matter, you count, you are absolutely necessary.”

We as Jews should know this well. Israel has always been willing to swap hundreds of terrorists for one Jewish hostage. And take the story of Gilad Shalit several years ago: How much effort and time was ultimately invested in successfully freeing this single Israeli soldier?!

The reason for this is because Judaism teaches us the indispensable value of even one individual. The value of life is not quantitative, but qualitative. Save one soul, and you save a universe.¹¹

¹¹ Mishne, Sanhedrin 37a.

9. Indispensability of Individuals

This also explains why the census was taken only nine times throughout history and will be taken a tenth time in the future.

During these times the essential indispensability of individuals was challenged, and that's exactly when we need the special emphasis of the census. By being counted, we are infused with the constant feeling of importance, and it feels as if we are being counted "all the time" (which we are, in fact, but only by God).

10. More Relevant Than Ever

The vital message of individual worth – the indispensability of each one of us – is relevant today more than ever. Paradoxically, the more the world progresses technologically, the more depersonalized life seems to be. In this age of mass production, statistics and communications at the speed of light, our individual contribution can often get lost in the fast shuffle.

People today are often valued not for who they truly are – or for their unique contributions in life – but for their buying power, performance, looks, youth and other superficial elements, which render them into commodities rather than souls. Just read any marketing or advertising plan, how people are broken down into demographics that have little or nothing to do with their individual indispensable mission in life.

No wonder so many of us feel, despite all our comforts and high standards of living, that we are insignificant. And nowhere is this more keenly felt than in the "battlefield" of the marketplace.

11. The Impersonal Nature of Materialism

Indeed, the very nature of materialism can be seen as inherently impersonal. Can two bodies with no soul connect? Unless we find a deeper common denominator, one piece of matter will have no relationship with another except for selfish gain.

Add into the equation the dysfunctionality of our times.

How many people here grew up in a home where not only were they not nurtured (which in itself is the greatest invalidation), but received the continuous message (in words, in absenteeism, or in outright abuse): “You don’t matter.” Or: “Your feelings don’t matter.” Or: “You are worthless.” These are today’s devastating ways of annihilating human dignity, and if an adult has a hard time withstanding them, how much less so an innocent, vulnerable child?

Thus we are told:

Each of you, upon entering into the “battle” of life, is counted – counted as a unique individual ... regardless who you are, what you have accomplished, what class you occupy on the social scale, how much equity you have built up ... regardless of what others think of you and what you think of yourself – you are absolutely significant.

No matter how many other people exist, you, the individual you, are counted – regardless of rank – as one and only one. Because you and only you have a contribution to make that no other individual but you can make.

And this counting of each one of us is done by God “all the time.” That is, its effect is perpetual. It is meant to imbue us with a constant sense of value and self-worth, of always knowing that we are needed.

That is the message of the Book of Numbers: God is counting you and saying that you matter and are needed. Yes, indeed!

And it is especially appropriate this Shabbat, which precedes Shavuot, when the value of each individual is pronounced. As the Midrash explains: “If the Jewish people were lacking just one person from the 600,000 Jews at Mount Sinai, they would not have received the Torah.”¹² Just one person...

With all the upheavals shaking up the world today, it is very easy to succumb to a feeling of powerlessness and insignificance in face of all the overwhelming forces swirling around us.

The message of the Book of Numbers could not be more appropriate:

Stand up and be counted! Know that you have been chosen to be living here and now, in this particular place and in this particular time, because you have an indispensable role to play. No matter how formidable the assault, you are not helpless. You count and are being counted (on). Amen.

¹² Midrash, Bereishit Rabba 70:9. Devorim Rabba 7:8. Mechilta Yisro19:11.