

## Parshas Bamidbar

### THE INDIVIDUAL'S ROLE IN A NATIONAL EVENT

Sefer Bamidbar opens with a Jewish national census.

Rashi explores the function and timing of a census, and explains that Hashem counted the Jews three times over a year and two weeks, because they were dear to Him; particularly after the Golden Calf, לידע מנין הנתרים – to know the number of the survivors. 0.5 percent of the Jews perished after the sin of the eigel, which means that 99.5 percent ‘survived’.

Why does Rashi use the word ‘survivors’ if the vast majority of the Jews did not perish?

Are people who don't die on the way to work considered “survivors” when they get home?

It's not the same; because all Jews are connected – like a puzzle. A puzzle is never complete unless all the pieces are in place, forming a picture. The Jews are incomplete unless all the Jews are included. Every Jew matters.

The Jews were not counted at Matan Torah – most critically important day in history. G-d revealed His reality to us, all of us – all the past, present and future generations of Jews are considered to have been at Sinai. Yet on the most significant day, on the day the relationship between God and his people was at its absolute peak, we were not counted. Why? The Torah records that the Jews assembled at Sinai כאיש אחד בלב אחד – like one man with one heart.

There is a very logical principle that אין מנין באחד – that you don't count to one. Things that are clearly unique don't lend themselves to numerical speculation. The question “Where do you live?” implicitly assumes that you have one address. Whilst our souls may have been there, did we ever have the option of saying no? Why should we be obligated a commitment the first generation of Jews made?

When a family converts to Judaism, the children are asked at their bar/bas mitzva if they want to continue being Jews. If they say no, which they can, then they are no longer Jewish and not bound to Judaism. Why aren't born Jews offered a similar choice?

The reason it sounds like a good question is that we are all influenced by western culture, where the individual is the epicentre of existence. But this is a mistake. Hitler's policy did not discriminate between religious or secular. Hitler also used the concept of collective responsibility. If one Jew stepped out of line, be it stealing, practising

Judaism, escaping, or disrespecting a Nazi, all the Jews in that camp, city, or ghetto were punished. That concept comes straight from the Torah.

Collective acceptance obligates everyone. Our primary identity is our Judaism. We are Jews who speak English, and not English speakers who happen to be Jews. You, and every single Jew you meet, are worthwhile. No matter the background, mistakes, ability, age, or anything. No one can ever take that away from you, nor you from anyone else. If you ever meet a Jew in a strange place, make sure to start a conversation!

## SILENCE IS GOLDEN

The princes of each tribe are identified in the census of the nation. But the lists are not identical, when they probably ought to be:

לְגַד אֶלְיָסָף בֶּן דְּעוּאֵל – For Gad, Elyasaf, son of De’uel. (1: 14)

וּמַטֵּה גָד וְנָשִׂיא לְבָנֵי גָד אֶלְיָסָף בֶּן דְּעוּאֵל – The prince of the children of Gad was Elyasaf, son of Re’uel. (2: 14)

His fathers name has changed. Why?

It is important to note that the names of the Nesi'im are not listed for historicity – all are written for deep rooted reasons – what follows is just one.

The Chida explains that the tribe of Gad merited Moshe Rabeinu being buried in their portion, as they kept silent in the face of Reuven's instructions. Reuven and Gad were encamped next to each other, and Reuven was “Rosh HaDegel” – leader of their formation, in charge of all camp movements. Reuven was a firstborn of Leah, as was Dan of Bilhah, and both tribes were “Rosh HaDegel”, whereas Gad, a firstborn Zilpah was overlooked. The tribe of Gad did not protest to Moshe that they weren't given this privilege, and as such merited for Moshe buried in their portion.

This trait is characterised in the saying of R' Shimon Ben Gamliel in Pirkei Avos *לא מצאתי לגוף טוב אלא שתיקה* – I've not found anything better for the body than silence. Self sacrifice in the interest of the greater good was prevalent in Moshe's personality too. Moshe is occasionally referred to as *ריע א-ל* – friend of G-d – the name of the ancestor of the Nasi of Gad – *רְעוּאֵל*.

There is a story told about the Sdei Chemed, who was already known for his diligence and sharpness as a young man. There were two young men who attempted to get into the yeshiva he studied in, but were rejected. Feeling bitter, one of them hatched a plot to get back at the institution, by disgracing its star student, the Sdei Chemed. The Beis Midrash was prepared every morning by a local village lady. Knowing that the Sdei Chemed was there by sunrise every morning, the plotter offered her money to falsely accuse the Sdei Chemed of molesting her one morning. She flatly refused, insisting that she would lose her job and income. The plotter assured he'd hire her if she lost her job, to which she agreed. Word got out that the Sdei Chemed had “molested” this woman, and the whole town was in outrage and uproar.

Knowing the Sdei Chemed's character, the Rosh Yeshiva was adamant and refused to believe her, and she lost her job, and would hear no more of the matter. Not days after the incident, the plotter who had paid off the woman passed away. She saw the young man had gotten his come-uppance, and he had died without getting her anew job. Tearful and contrite, she approached the Sdei Chemed on his way home and begged forgiveness, and told him the

truth of what had happened, and asked that he go to the Rosh Yeshivah and try to get her old job back. The Sdei Chemed accepted her apology on the spot; “I have no problem helping you get your old job back, I’ll sort that out. But I forbid you from disgracing the memory of the deceased by mentioning his involvement!”

Chazal say מעביר על מדותיו, מעבירים לו כל פשעיו. Overlooking personal inconvenience to preserve what’s right is a phenomenally difficult thing to achieve, but its worth it.

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