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## Parshat Bamidbar: On Individuals and Community

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Our sages referred to the entire Sefer Bamidbar as *Chumash HaPekudim* (Yoma 3a, 68b, Sota 36b). *Pekudim* means counting and refers to the census. But is this really an appropriate name to give the entire book? Is the entire book of Sefer Bamidbar concerned only with numbers and counting? Do we need to know that the sum total of the community is 63,550 people? What's more, the people have already been counted once before. Why, now, does the community need to be counted again?

Perhaps the answer lies in a better understanding the dual meaning of the word *pekudim*. *Pekudim* is derived from the root P'K'D and can be translated and used in two seemingly unrelated ways. On one hand, the word *tfkod* is used to count, as in

אַךְ אֶת-מִטֵּה לְוִי לֹא תִפְקֹד

You shall not count the Levites (1:49)

Seen in this way, Sefer Bamidbar or *Chumash HaPekudim* becomes nothing more than a strings of numbers all melded together. It is as we read in the Haftorah--

וְהָיָה מִסְפֵּר בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, כְּחֹל הַיָּם, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִמָּד, וְלֹא יִסָּפֵר

The number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can neither be measured nor counted" (Hoseah 2:1)

But *pakad* can also be used in the context of *hafked*, as in to appoint or elect an individual to fulfill a specific duty. As we begin to look a little more closely at the book of Bamidbar, even in the first section which deals with a lot of numbers, we see that, in fact, *Chumash HaPekudim* is about the development of the individual.

A close look at the initial request to count the people says:

שָׂאוּ, אֶת-רֹאשׁ כָּל-עֵדֻת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם, לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם--בְּמִסְפַּר שְׁמוֹת, כָּל-זָכָר לְגִלְגֻלְתָּם.

Take a census of the entire assembly of the children of Israel according to their father's household, by number of the names, every one according to their headcount. (Bamidbar 1:2)

Ramban asks our question: why is the Torah so concerned with knowing the general number of the camp, especially as the nation had already been counted once before? Ramban answers: the Torah emphasizes B'nai Yisrael should be counted not to know the aggregate of the entire community, but rather: "with the number of their names...by their polls" because "The Holy One blessed be he ordered Moses to number them in a manner that would confer honor and greatness on each one of them, individually. Not that you should say to the head of the family: How many are there in your family? How many children have you?' But rather all of them should pass before you in awe and with the honor due to them." (Ramban Bamidbar 1:45)

Accordingly, the beginning of Bamidbar is not concerned with dry statistics, but rather the formation of individuals. Each tribal leader is appointed: Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai, Nachshon son of Amminadav. The children of Israel are not only enumerated, but the role of each individual is designated, appointed.

Sefer Bamidbar is called *Chumash HaPekudim*, not because it is a book of numbers to be counted, but rather because each individual counts.

But, the Torah is also concerned with the development of the community. Although the book of Genesis narrates the development of particular individuals, the rest of the Torah highlights the development of a community. The second message of the census is that each individual was seen within the context of the nation being formed, with that of *machane Yisrael* (the camp of Israel). And, it is a community that is comprised of distinct tribal units. B'nei Yisrael forms a harmonious society, not a uniform one. The unique qualities of each tribe are nurtured and sustained.

So when the Torah stresses that every person was counted *legulgilotam* (by his head) (1:2), as an individual, each person's singular characteristics, which are exclusive to the individual are not to be suppressed and destroyed, but protected and integrated into the national whole, into the entire Jewish community.

The ideal of *machane Yisrael* rejects individualism, in which a person denies his or her communal obligations and responsibilities. But the *machane* also rejects uniformity, which forces the individual to conform, and thereby deadens his singular characteristics and qualities.

שאו, את-ראש כל-עדת בני-ישראל

Yes, Take a census ("raise the heads") of the whole Israelite community. But count each person "head by head." (Bamidbar 1:2)

The head of each individual is "raised" as each is counted and awarded their specific role within the *machane*. Unique characteristics are not suppressed, but recognized and utilized in the formation of the nation. The Torah does not expect us to conform to others, but rather to be part of a greater whole. To express one's individuality, but to do so for the betterment of a harmonious community.



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