



Why Does Hashem Command to Count Only the Men?

Why Don't Women Count?

It is fortunate that when I was newly Torah observant, I didn't have a chance to read *Parashat Bamidbar* thoroughly, as I was busy with getting married, setting up our new home and then taking care of my baby. Had I read the beginning of the Book of *Bamidbar* carefully then, I would have been quite uncomfortable by the fact that only the men had to be counted, whereas the women were not included in the census, as if women don't count in Judaism! Today, I am, Baruch Hashem, in a different place. I have learned enough to know that to understand the Torah, especially the issues connected with women and women's role in Judaism, we need to look deeper – beyond the surface. First of all, we must look at the census of B'nei Yisrael in context. We need to understand why the Book of *Bamidbar* opens with a census?

במדבר פרק א פסוק ב שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עַדְת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם בְּמִסְפַּר שְׁמוֹת כָּל־זָכָר לְגִלְגֻלְתָּם:

“Take the sum of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, by families following their fathers' houses; a head count of every male according to the number of their names” (*Bamidbar* 1:2).

Due to this opening census, the Book of *Bamidbar* is also known as *Sefer HaPekudim* – the Book of Numbers (Hence the English translation). We need to explore the purpose of that census, especially since the Jewish nation had already been counted in the Book of *Shemot*, and surely, Hashem knew our numbers without a need for a physical census. The following Torah verse gives us a clue:

במדבר פרק א פסוק ג מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְיָמָעְלָה כָּל־יֵצֵא צָבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל תִּפְקְדוּ אֹתָם לְצַבְאֹתָם אֹתָהּ וְאֶהְרֹן:
 “From twenty years old and upwards, all who are fit to go out to the army in Israel, you shall count them by their legions you and Aharon” (*Bamidbar* 1:3).

It is clear that only ‘all who are fit to go out in the army of Israel’ were counted. Military participation is the main focus of *Parashat Bamidbar* and the root א-ב-צ/tzadi-veit-alef – ‘army’ appears no less than 34 times in this week's *Parasha*. On a simple level, since [women are exempt from serving as combat soldiers](#), they are excluded from the census. Yet, there are also deeper reasons why women are not counted, neither here, in a minyan, nor for other religious purposes. Perhaps, when we comprehend these reasons, we will realize that the fact that women aren't counted in the Torah does not depreciate our status.

Men Correspond to ‘Quantity’ While Women Reflect ‘Quality’

It is not always complementary to be counted. We all want to be more than just a mere number. When counted, a person may feel dehumanized, and question himself, “What am I? What difference do I make? I am a mere grain of sand on the seashore, dust on the surface of infinity.” This is why, rather than using one of the many Hebrew words for counting, such as ספור/sefor, Hashem commanded שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ/se'u et rosh – “lift the head.” What is the meaning of the phrase “lift the head” in the context of a census? To counterbalance the natural feeling of insignificance a person may feel when counted, G-d tells Moshe to lift people's heads by showing that they count and matter as individuals (Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, *Leading a Nation of Individuals*). Women do not need to be placated in this way, as we are never looked upon as a

mere number. This is because 'man' represents the external, while 'woman' corresponds to the internal dimension. When counting anything, we only count the external – the quantity rather than the quality. Although, I don't think my husband will like this equation, I venture to say that men correspond to 'quantity' whereas, women reflect 'quality.' This explains not just why only men are counted in the Torah, but also why the status of "who is a Jew" depends specifically on the mother. Since, in the Torah, the woman represents the inner dimension – the essence – she is the one who bequeaths her essential Jewishness to her children.

Why is it Prohibited to Count People?

In our Corona time, we take strong precautions individually and globally to curb the spread of the plague of Covid 19. Yet, the precautions of the Ministry of Health are expectedly only in the physical realm. The Torah gives spiritual remedies for preventing a plague and one of them is avoiding counting people:

"When you take the census of *B'nei Yisrael* to determine their numbers, let each man give to Hashem an atonement for his soul when you count them, then there will be no plague among them when they are counted" (*Shemot* 30:12).

This is why in Torah observant communities, rather than counting each person as a number, we find alternative ways to know the amount of a group when necessary. Rashi explains that counting people empowers the Ayin Hara (the Evil Eye) to harm them, just like we found in the times of King David. Therefore, the Talmud lays down a clear prohibition against counting people:

Rabbi Eleazar said: Whosoever counts Israel, transgresses a [biblical] prohibition, as it is said: "Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured and numbered" [*Hoshea* 2:1]. Rabbi Nachman ben Yitzchak said: He would transgress two prohibitions, for it is written: "Which cannot be measured nor numbered" (*Babylonian Talmud, Yoma* 22b).

If it is prohibited to count Jews, then why does Hashem command Moshe to count the sons of Israel at the beginning of the Book of *Bamidar*? The continuation of the Talmud answers this question by differentiating between counting done by human beings and counting done by Heaven. When a man counts people, each person is vulnerable to the grip of extraneous forces, as he is being separated from the community by a number. However, Hashem is the great unifier. In His count resides the tie that binds and connects each individual with the community. Furthermore, counting done by human beings usually emanates from pride, and expresses an external show of strength – "look how many and mighty we are!" This is the reason a plague resulted from David's counting of the people, as mentioned in II *Shemuel*, Chapter 24. When people count and number a group of people, they can become subject to Ayin Hara and disease may follow. Thus, we try to count in the most inconspicuous and unpretentious way possible, to prevent inflating our ego and causing arrogance, thereby eliciting jealousy and negative energy. Therefore, to this day, it is the custom not to count people in a regular fashion. Rather, when it is necessary to count a group of men to know whether there is a minyan or not, the custom is to use the following Torah verse which consists of ten words of blessing:

סַפֵּר תְּהִילִים פֶּרֶק כַּח פְּסוּקָה ט הוֹשִׁיעָה אֶת עַמְּךָ וּבְרַךְ אֶת נַחֲלֶתְךָ וְרַעַם וְנִשְׂאָם עַד הָעוֹלָם:

"Save Your people, and bless Your inheritance; and tend them, and carry them forever" (*Tehillim* 28:9).

May Hashem protect His people and remove the plague from among us and may all the sick be healed!