

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Bamidbar - Shavuot)

Numbers; such a simple concept; too often taken for granted. But every once in a while, you get the opportunity to appreciate all over again the significance of each and every number.

I remember the first time, as an officer, I ever came under fire...well, sort of....

It was a bitter cold night in late December, and we were stationed on the edge of the Bekaa valley, in Lebanon. Intelligence had received information that terrorists might try to infiltrate south through the valley under cover of darkness, and we had orders to mount an ambush in an effort to stop them from getting over the border into Israel.

We set out at around 10 pm. A light rain had begun falling, and there was a heavy fog in the valley, which made for a lot of tension, as these were classic conditions for terrorist penetration.

A couple of kilometers from the designated ambush site, we sent a two-man point-patrol ahead to spot-check the site, and the rest of us took a few moments to put on heavier winter gear. We were about to spend a good number of hours lying in the wet cold night of Lebanon, and we had special one-piece snow Parkas that were too cumbersome and hot for the trek from our drop-off point to the ambush site.

Eventually everyone was ready, and the point-patrol got back with the 'all-clear'.

The aim of the next half an hour, given that this was meant to be an ambush, was not just to get in position; it was to get into position quietly. The entire squad slows down, with every step considered in order to avoid any unnecessary noise. Soldiers avoid putting anything in pockets that make noise, dog tags are taped to avoid metallic sounds, canteens are filled to avoid sloshing sounds, and of course the radio is on silent mode.

When you arrive at the ambush site, after a process of sweeping the area again for safety, the men eventually lie down on the ground in the form of a star, feet on the inside and heads out, with everyone given different, over-lapping quadrants they are responsible for watching. For five minutes, nobody moves; you just lie in total, tense silence, listening to the sounds of the night for anything that doesn't seem to fit in....

In the movies this may all seem very exciting, but in reality, it is incredibly depressing. Lying on the ground for hours on end, trying to stay warm, and for that matter, awake, can get pretty tedious. The first thing that begins to cause trouble is your neck. The pain of trying to keep your head up and looking out while lying prostate on the ground is something I can still feel on the back of my neck and all the way down my back to this day.

As the officer in charge, you are designated 12 o'clock, and your first sergeant, directly behind you and looking the opposite way, is called six o'clock. This way, everyone gets oriented pretty quickly, and in the event of trouble you don't have to try to figure out which direction it's coming from.

It is hard to describe the intense silence mixed with boredom, exhaustion, as well as the tension of knowing where you are and what you are doing, that settles in. But it was all of this that made what happened next such a shock.

All of a sudden, round about midnight, night turned into day and the silence exploded into a cacophony of gunfire as they opened up on us.

We were lying on a low hill in the middle of a large valley, with a few scattered Arab villages round about, and in the space of about five seconds our entire left flank was filled with the sounds of gunfire.

We had obviously come under heavy attack, and our position must have been 'made'. At this point there was no longer any point to maintaining silence so I started yelling out commands as loud as I could above the sounds of gunfire. There are a number of things that go through your mind in such a moment, but most of all you discover how good all the training you received really was. They teach you not to wait until you are attacked, but to constantly be thinking what you would do in the event you are attacked, something I had been reviewing in my mind more as a 'stay awake' exercise just a moment earlier.

Standard procedure is to quickly get everyone in a line facing the enemy (in this case, my three o' clock,) and unleash a barrage of fire in the direction the enemy fire is coming from. At this point, to be honest, you're not scared, because you know what you are supposed to do, you're following 'the book' and whatever will happen is pretty much out of your hands. There's a recipe and all you have to do is follow it. You can't really judge distances at night, so you have no real way of knowing whether they are near or far; you're just firing into the night. At the same time, the radioman is screaming our position (already known) and 'contact' report to battalion headquarters.

And that's when it got scary, because about a minute or so after our first contact, we came under more heavy fire, but this time from behind. This is an incredibly frightening feeling, but at least, again, you have been prepared for it. There is a standard response in such a situation; something I did not imagine I would ever have to employ, but which nonetheless has been ingrained into you by various sadistic commanders in the Officer's Course: you simply split your unit. Half the men continue firing forward, and the other half turn around and begin firing back to your six.

And then it got out of control. Because at this point, having radioed Battalion that we were in need of either a withdrawal order, or back-up units, we suddenly came under fire again, from a third direction, and seconds later from a fourth. In fact, it seemed the entire valley was alive with gunfire, along with an anti-tank shell that came screaming down from a Syrian position up in the mountains a few clicks away. Clearly, we were in way over our heads...

Orders were given to get us out and we began pulling down off the hilltop back in the direction of the trail where there was a covered wood with a ditch I had seen earlier that I thought would give us more cover. I was still struggling with just how we had been detected and why no one had heard anything, when, just as quickly as it all began, it all stopped. The entire valley just went dead. This was really eerie and rather unnerving, as it meant there was one organized command center calling the shots, and this was obviously a unit much larger than any we had been briefed even existed in Southern Lebanon.

We made it in a couple of minutes back down to the ditch, at which point I ordered a count-off. This is also standard procedure. You need to know, is everyone with you? Are there any wounded? The seconds that ticked off as each man, awed by the sudden silence, whispered his number were like a lifetime for

me. I cannot begin to describe the wave of relief that swept over me when I realized that not only were all my men present and accounted for, but not one of them had gotten even so much as a scratch.

And then the call came in over the radio that explained the entire course of events. You see, living in Israel, in a Jewish state, I had completely forgotten that Dec 31st is also New Year's Eve. And all the Christian villages in the area, not being able to afford fireworks, just shot off all their ammunition instead....!

Needless to say, by this time headquarters decided our position was blown and we headed back to base for what ended up being the first good night's sleep in a long time....

Counting: Giving each person a number, whether in the army, in a classroom, or on a field trip, is an idea that merits consideration. Why do we need numbers? How do we utilize them? Simply put, numbers allow us to designate individual items as part of a larger group. When something is given a number, it is essentially made equal, or equivalent on some level, to every other object included in that list of numbers.

Most often, we use numbers to assure that we include all the members or items we intend to, in a given group. A numbered list ensures that we don't forget anyone or anything on the list.

All of which makes one wonder what is really at the root of the commandment at the beginning of this week's portion:

"Se'u et rosh kol adat B'nei Yisrael be'mispar shemot tifke'du otam, atah ve' Aharon."

"Count each head of the congregation of Israel, according to their families...count them... you (Moshe) and Aaron." (Numbers 1:2-3)

G-d tells Moshe to initiate a counting of the entire Jewish people and interestingly, Moshe is not to do this on his own; his brother Aaron must assist in the task.

What is the purpose of this massive counting? Does G-d want to check on the population growth? Is this about making sure there is enough Manna in heaven's budget? Obviously, G-d doesn't need a count; we do. Like every other process given us by Hashem, there is a message hidden within this seemingly innocuous command. Why are we counting?

More challenging is the fact that it seems we just finished counting everyone a few months ago. Indeed, **Rashi** himself (1:1) points out that there were actually three instances where the Jewish people were counted, in their first thirteen months in the desert: after they left Egypt, after the debacle of the Golden calf, and just prior to the time when the Divine Presence (the *Shechinah*) came to rest in the newly dedicated Tabernacle (Mishkan).

So what is all this counting about?

Further, it is noteworthy that here, unlike previous instances where the Jewish people are counted, the task is not the responsibility of Moshe alone; Aaron is also part of this Mitzvah. (Hence here the word used for counting is *Se'u*, count in the plural, as opposed to the word *Sah'*, in the singular, in Exodus 30:12, where the command is given only to Moshe.) What is so special about this particular counting that merits the special inclusion of Aaron in the counting?

Lastly, **Rashi**, the medieval super-commentary on the Bible, in discussing this issue (1:1) shares a couple of note-worthy points. Sensitive to the question of G-d's need for a numerical accounting of anything, Rashi suggests that the reason for this and all counts of the Jewish people is:

"Mi'toch chibatan le'fanav"; "Because of their affection before Him."

How does counting signify G-d's love? And why is there a need at this juncture for a demonstration of that love? Doesn't Hashem love us all the time? Indeed, Rashi himself makes that exact point, suggesting that because of this great love Hashem has for us,

"Moneh otam kol sha'ah" "He counts them (the Jewish people) all the time".

What does this mean? Hashem is counting us all the time, of course, because there is never a need for Hashem to count us at all. Hashem's awareness is unlimited, and there cannot be a process that provides new information to G-d; such information is not only already known to G-d, it is actually part of the totality of reality that *is* G-d.

Indeed, as Rashi points out, we are already constantly counted before G-d, and in fact the number that represents us, both past, present and future, ad infinitum, is all one before G-d. So what does this counting represent, especially at a given time and place?

What is really going on when we are counted together as a people? Essentially we all become one, equal parts of a whole, of a community. When we are all counted as equals, in a sense, we have the opportunity to discover that there is a part of each of us that is equal before G-d. We are not being counted based on our intellects; after all, some amongst us are smarter and wiser, while some have a slower wit and less garnered wisdom. Nor are we counted based on the level of ethical excellence we have achieved, for in this respect also, some are more righteous than others, even if we are not capable of necessarily discerning the difference. Rather, a 'count' speaks to the part of each one of us that will always remain equal.

Any instance in which anything is counted focuses on that aspect of a given list of items which is common and the same. If I am counting fruits, for example, even though bananas and pears are very different, I may not be interested in the difference between different fruits, I am rather focusing on the commonality of all fruits as edible items. And when we are counted as individuals we are focusing on the common ground we share as people.

When the press determines how many people attend a particular demonstration there is no interest in how many lawyers and how many doctors there are; the point of such a count is merely to ascertain how many human beings have made a statement together as a group. The count then focuses on that part of who we are as individuals which is common to us all.

I recall vividly the day of Yitzchak Rabin of blessed memory's funeral. It was the largest gathering of Jews I have ever witnessed, with estimates of nearly a million people in attendance. That would mean nearly one fifth of the Jewish population of the entire country.

People of every background, level, and profession, from across the political spectrum came to make a statement, and for one day there were no religious and secular, no right and left, no rich and no poor. For in that mass of humanity we all shared the experience of being a part of one larger community.

There is a power to being part of such a mass of humanity. Such a 'count' speaks not to our philosophical leanings, nor to our religious preferences. Rather such an experience speaks to the essence

of what in the end we all share in common. It reaches into our souls which is the essence of who we really are.

It is worth noting that this Shabbat's portion of **Bamidbar**, almost always falls on the Shabbat before the festival of *Shavuot*, which celebrates the receiving of the Torah at Sinai. The moment of the giving of the Torah at Sinai is often described as the wedding of the Jewish people and their beloved G-d. So if *Shavuot* is the wedding, then this Shabbat is what is known as the *Shabbat Kallah*, the Shabbat when the bride and groom in their respective communities, celebrate the beginning of the new relationship they are about to enter. It is fitting then that this week focuses on the essence of this relationship.

At the foot of Sinai, thirty-two hundred years ago, the Jewish people are described (Exodus 19) as having encamped as one: one people, with one heart. At Sinai we all stood together: the prophets and the plumbers, the scholars and the shoemakers, all one and equal in the eyes of G-d.

Perhaps this is the point of such a count: to remind us that at the heart of it all, every one of us is equal before Hashem. This is an idea which is constant, and is meant to be a part of our consciousness at all times, hence Rashi's comment: "*Moneh otam kol sha'ah*" "*He counts them (the Jewish people) all the time*".

And yet, the Torah takes the time to make this point at a number of specific junctures in the history of the making of the Jewish people. We were first counted when we left Egypt. Because there was a message we needed to inculcate into our psyches from the moment we left Egypt behind us. Egypt, with its rigid caste system of haves and have-nots, a society where the rich, powerful and even holy caste of priests, ruled the weak and less fortunate, this was not at all what Judaism was about.

The idea of a shared commonality of man, where each and every human being was born with a soul loved equally before G-d, burst onto the world scene with the splitting of the sea, when the entire Jewish community traveled as one.

Later, the debacle of the Golden Calf found the Jewish people on the threshold of this new age, sinking back into the morass of pagan idolatry, a system where the worship of nature meant that the strong survived, and the weak perished or served the mighty. And so, once again, we needed to remember this idea, which stands at the core of who we are as a people.

And finally, this week's counting represents the beginning of the era of a Temple, (or its predecessor, the *Mishkan*) and the point in our history as a people when we became partners in bringing G-d into this world.

Perhaps especially at this point in time, with the inauguration of the priesthood, and the concept of holy space, it is so crucial to re-connect with this idea.

And maybe this is why this count involves Aaron, as well as Moshe. Aaron, who is the symbol of the priesthood, and thus of that aspect of who we are that we are born into, becomes the vehicle through which we as a people are reminded that nonetheless, we are all one in Hashem's eyes.

It is interesting to note that we as individuals are exhorted on a number of occasions not to count human beings. (Indeed, King David and his men suffer severe consequences in the book of *Samuel* for just such a count....) The idea behind this prohibition is that a human being should never be thought of as a

number. We have learned all too painfully in our generation what happens when human beings are reduced to being numbers.

But that is very different from the idea we are expressing here where we do not become numbers, rather, the numbers allow us to experience the essence of who we are as a community.

The best example of this dichotomy within Judaism is the concept of a quorum, the *minyan* necessary for transforming the individual event into the community experience. As **Rav Soleveitchik**, one of the great sages and foremost thinkers of our generation points out, when that tenth individual enters the synagogue, he does not simply add himself as one more person in the room or 10% of the equation. Rather, he transforms the group of individuals into a community.

And indeed, these ten individuals are just that: ten equal individuals. It does not matter if, prior to the entrance of that tenth person, there are nine Torah scholars who happen to be the undisputed great sages of the generation, or nine janitors, teen-agers, or even nine Jews who just opened up a prayer book for the first time in their lives. Any nine people still need a tenth to transform that group into a Jewish community.

In the end we are, all of us, one community only when we are fully in touch with the essence that we share in common, found in each and every one of us.

Given the challenges we are facing in our day, and especially in recent times, we would do well to consider and ponder this thought.

May Hashem bless us all, soon, to be able to see the beauty in every one of us so that we can rediscover and rebuild that incredible moment of one-ness we shared together once, long ago, beneath a small mountain deep in the Sinai desert.

Shabbat Shalom, and best wishes for a happy and meaningful Shavuot!

Binny Freedman from Jerusalem