

Parashat **B'midbar**

The Hebrew Bible is not identical to the Christian Old Testament. The order of the books is different, and the names of the books do not always match. This week's Torah Portion gives a good example of how we view the Bible in different ways.

We will chant from the first few chapters of ... of what? In Hebrew it is called *Sefer B'midbar*, the "Book of Being in the Wilderness", namely the Sinai Desert. However, in English it is called the Book of Numbers, and therein lies the problem. As a general rule, we Jews are not supposed to count people.

In the Christian Old Testament, the order of the books was changed to a chronological presentation of the entire story, so that it leads up to the New Testament subject matter. Also, some Bible books were given names that reflect a non-Jewish view of the subject matter. The name "*B'midbar*" in Hebrew is more representative of the desert journeys in the **entire** Book of Numbers. The census we read about today is only one episode.

We Jews did not accept the re-ordering of the books in the Hebrew Bible; the order we have reflects the approximate order in which they were written through the centuries. However, we did accept the renaming in our English translations of the Hebrew Bible. Why is it a problem that the fourth book of the *Torah* was renamed "Book of Numbers"?

There are two uses of a census which are uncomfortable: military service and taxes. Earlier this year we chanted a *Torah* portion that provides a wonderful way to conduct a census without actually counting people. Everyone paid half a *shekel* to the priests, the money was counted, and the number was doubled which gave the census numbers.

Judaism posits a world-view in which each individual person has intrinsic worth and value, and should thus be treated with justice and equality. This is hard to do when we are known only as a number rather than by our name.

Yes, we have a Social Identification Number, a driver's license number, a passport number, credit card numbers, and frequent flier numbers. However, most of these are merely tools for making our way through a modern society – they are not our identity.

In a world with over 7 billion people, 14 million Jews make up .2% of the population

or two tenths of one percent. In Saskatoon, we also make up .2% of our population. This means that in a room full of 1,000 people, two would be Jewish. If Sask Place / Credit Union Center were full, there would be about 20 Jews in the entire crowd.

Therefore, every Jew really counts, both in the world in general and in Saskatoon in particular. When we “count heads” to see if we have a *minyán*, we do so indirectly, by saying a verse from Psalm 28:9 – “*Hoshi-ah et amecha, uvareich et nachalatecha, ur-eim v’nas’-eim ad ha-olam*” or “Deliver and bless Your People, sustain them forever”.

When the Nazis began the Holocaust, they did everything possible to dehumanize the Jews of Europe, thus making it easier for ordinary Germans to murder their Jewish neighbors. This culminated in the tattooing of a number on the arm of each Jew who lived in certain concentration camps, thereby taking away their intrinsic humanity.

We Jews do count time, marking the days between Passover and Shavuot. The days of the week are called in Hebrew “*Yom Rishon, Yom Sheini, ...*” which literally means “First Day, Second Day, ...” leading up to the special day of Shabbat, “*Shabbat Kodesh*”.

God also counts us, according to the *Untaneh Tokef* prayer in the *Musaf* service on the High Holy Days: “On this holy day we all pass before You, one by one, like a flock of sheep. As a shepherd counts his sheep, so You review every living being, measuring their years and declaring the destiny of every creature.”

For most of the years after World War II there was a small black *Siddur* used by almost all Conservative congregations, the “Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book”, edited by Rabbi Morris Silverman. In it are many beautiful English passages, including the following text for the announcing of the New Month:

“Teach us to number our days, that we may use each precious moment wisely.” This line was adapted from Psalm 90:12 “*Limnot yameinu kein hoda, v’navi leivav hochmah*” or “Teach us to count our days rightly, that we may obtain a wise heart.”

As we approach *Shavuot* this weekend, and finally enter our short summer season, we look ahead to the upcoming High Holy Days just a few months away. May we each be blessed with the wisdom to “number our days” and “use each precious moment wisely”.