

Parshat Bemidbar: On censuses and counting people - May 11, 2013

We begin this week the fourth book of Torah, Bemidbar (Numbers), in which we return to narrative once more time. We are in the desert of Sinai, on the beginning of the month of Iyar and on the second year of the Exodus from Egypt. The Mishkan (Tabernacle) had been completed one month before, and now God asks from the People of Israel are to be counted through a census.

Jews we have an old tradition that says we don't count people. Why? Following the particular situation of the Israelites in the dessert, I think we can conclude that a a census was not well seen because it affects our understanding of God and His power.

Miracles happen under circumstances that are by nature miraculous and unconfined. The process of counting limits or at best, restricts miracles, because imposes boundaries to what could be modified by a miracle. If God promised Abraham that the Israelites will be "numberless like the stars", what is the reason now for transforming what was "numberless" into a concrete number?

The Rabbis overcome this question saying that if a census is needed then two conditions must be fulfilled: First, the counting must be done in an indirect way (In the Torah this is the case with taking the "half-shekel" from each individual and then counting the money and dividing them in two parts). Secondly, the counting may only be done if there is a good reason to do it (That is why King David was punished after doing a census without real cause).

It seems to me that the theology behind this tradition of not counting people (it is must be said that it was never codified as Jewish Law – it belongs to popular belief) is based on the

idea that if we count the number of Jews we will be putting limits of God and His Creation. That would be the reason why we, for example, don't count people for a Minyan but recite a verse from the Scriptures that has ten verses ("Hoshia et amecha ubarech et nahalatecha urem v'nasem ad olam"). That way we won't be reducing the uniqueness of each person, created according to His image and power, to just a number.

Shabbat Shalom!