

Prashat Pinchas

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The Jewish Center

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As Parashat Pinchas opens, the Israelites have descended into decadent idolatry and God punishes them with a plague. Pinchas, Aaron's grandson, thinking that he is doing God's work, takes the law into his own hands. He brutally murders an Israelite man and a Midianite woman who were both engaged in some public hanky panky. Pinchas' reward for his zealotry was a "covenant of peace" and a "lasting Priesthood." I am sure that this drama of succession, carnal desire, and murder would make an exciting foundation for a Netflix worthy d'var Torah. Unfortunately for this congregation, I have chosen to focus on one of the boring parts of the parasha that most folks like to skip, a clinical count of the kehillah.

The call for a census of our coreligionists came from the Almighty itself. Moses and Eleazar were instructed to count Israelite men 20 years old and up. Ultimately over 600,000 men were counted. The text seems to imply that the census was intended to establish how many warriors the Israelites would have available for their upcoming battles to conquer Canaan. This rationale makes sense given the how close we are to entering the land of Israel and the need to account for how many able-bodies Israelites would be able to fight the good fight for the Promised Land.

This is neither the first time nor would it be the last time Israelites are counted in the bible. Genesis transitions into Exodus with a count of the number of Jacob's family members who went to Egypt. The number of the Israelites who left Egypt are noted in Numbers thirty-eight years prior to the census in our parasha. Once we pass Pinchas, we also come across a count in 2 Samuel during the reign of King David. Later, the exiles who returned to Judea in Ezra were counted too.

While the count in King David's time would, like the count in Pinchas, be tied to military preparations, we find that biblical call to count was often inspired by range of considerations. For example, the count immediately following the Exodus, according to commentators, was supposed to highlight the magnitude of God's accomplishments by way of providing a clear account of the sheer number of Israelites that had been delivered from bondage.

God's inspiration and direction when it comes to the counting of Israelites is even more explicit in Isaiah 40:26 (with credit to Suzi Park)¹:

שָׂאוּ-מְרוֹם עֵינֵיכֶם וְרֵאוּ מִי-בָרָא אֱלֹהִים, הַמּוֹצִיא בְּמִסְפָּר צְבָאִים

Lift up your eyes on high, and see: who hath created these?

He that bringeth out their host by number,

Embedded within this verse is a compelling connection between counting and creation itself, a proclamation of divine power that places this seemingly prosaic part of Parashat Pinchas within the unique purview of God.

Heavy stuff.

¹ <https://blog.bibleodyssey.org/articles/counting-and-censuses-in-the-hebrew-bible/>

The commitment among our coreligionists continues after the conclusion of the biblical era. In her 1971 essay in Commentary “Counting Jews,” Ruth Gay writes of clear and consistent practice among Jewish nobles and travelers to enquire about the fate and number of fellow Jews. Gay cites two examples across the centuries². Here I paraphrase Gay:

In the 10th century, when Hasdai Ibn Shaprut was physician and vizier to the Caliph of Cordova, discovered that there was a kingdom of Jews ruled by a Jewish king on the shores of the Black Sea—the land of the Khazars—he arranged to send a letter through an elaborate chain of envoys to this king. In it, after the usual opening compliments, he soon comes to the point: “Let not my Lord take it ill, I pray, that I enquire about the number of his forces (may the Lord add unto them . . .)! My Lord sees that I enquire about this with no other object than that I may rejoice when I hear of the increase of the holy people.”

An illustrious Italian rabbi of the 15th century, Obadiah da Bertinoro, is no different. Writing a letter to his father about a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he interweaves his pious reflections at every stage with the refrain of: “Palermo is the chief town of Sicily, and contains about 850 Jewish families. . . . Messina is not so large as Palermo, neither has it such good springs. . . . There are about 400 Jewish families. . . . Not many Jews have remained in Rhodes; altogether there are twenty-two families, all poor, who subsist with difficulty on vegetables.”

Our more recent history is replete with counts as well. Each year around Rosh HaShanah the government of the State of Israel announces its count of its citizens. In the diaspora many of us have studied the Pew report on Jewish demographics and closer to home at TJC we count our members each board meeting. Tragically, we also count the six million who perished in the Shoah and the 120 who remain in captivity in Gaza.

As Jewish as all this counting may seem, there is a little problem: our tradition forbids us from counting Jews. Our Rabbis do not all agree on the exact source of this prohibition and if it is biblical or rabbinic; Rashi holds for the former and several later commentators hold for the latter. But whatever the source against counting Jews generally and holding a census specifically may be, the rules here are clear. Indeed, the Gemara in Masechet Brachot (62b) notes that “even school children” are aware of the prohibition and the calamitous consequences of counting our compatriots. To prove its point the Gemara notes that the census held by King David that we referenced earlier, led to the death of 70,000 Jews.

If you are scratching your head right now, I am with you. The God in our Bible effectively told us to do something that he told us not to do.

Perhaps the way to reconcile this apparent contradiction on counting is to acknowledge that the tension is likely intentional. Jewish tradition is practical and generally seeks to navigate between seemingly conflicting poles. We do not ban eating meat like some religions - even though many commentators through the centuries struggle with how problematic meat consumption - but we put constraints on our consumption of it through our dietary laws. Similarly, there were generally good practical reasons for a counting Jews but when we do so, there must be a check on the

² <https://www.commentary.org/articles/ruth-gay/counting-jews/>

potential for such abstractions to cause harm. The common legalistic workaround past the prohibition against counting – replacing numbers with words (Hoshea et amecha...for counting a minyan) or the downright silly convention of counting “not” one, “not” too – seems to miss the point. I much prefer Rabbi Yitz Greenberg’s insights in his article on the Limits of Numbers³ where writes that the prohibition against counting people speaks directly to our tradition’s most fundamental values regarding personhood. By reducing an individual to a number, we risk robbing them of their dignity and can negate the notion that we are all created b’tselem elokim. Numbers are finite but human beings, created in the image of God, have infinite value.

I am sure that our own experience validates the wisdom of Rabbi Greenberg’s view. How can a number capture the beauty, majesty and holiness of a fellow human? Our congregation is made up of some 400 member units but how does that number capture the humanity of the educators among us who teach us or the generous patrons who contribute funds to sustain us? We are a community of individuals named Nancy, Jerry, Andrea and Tirza who all contribute to our cherished collective. How many of us struggle to understand and internalize the magnitude of the Shoah when confronted by the number six million? Yet when we read the diary of Anne Frank, I am sure none of us can escape the tangible feelings of horror and outrage for her struggles and ultimate murder. I suspect that we all confront the same reality when we think of the hostages in captivity in Gaza. The thought of 120 innocents spread across a warzone and used as human shields while enduring unspeakable horrors may just be too abstract for many of us to understand. But we cannot feel anything but fear and concern for Hersh Goldberg-Polin, an Israeli-American who not too long ago enjoyed a summer at Camp Ramah like many of our children. If we do not know Hersh, we know so many bright, young, heroic Jews just like him making his suffering real and tangible for all of us.

If we take away a set of lessons from this week’s parasha, let us agree to never be tempted to abstract away our fellow human’s humanity. Let us always appreciate the holiness of each of our brothers and sisters. And let God hear and answer the call to bring Hersh Goldberg-Polin and all of the 120 hostages home!

Shabbat Shalom

³ <https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/limits-numbers>