

TIMELESS TORAH

BAMIDBAR : FROM COUNTING TO CONTRIBUTION

Standing Out

Sefer Bamidbar begins with a census. Each adult member of the nation is counted, and tallies are made of every family group. With the Mishkan finally erect, forming the focus of the encampment, this census will help define the roles of each tribe, family and individual within the nation. The tribe of Levi, however, is an exception. They are not included in the initial census, an absence that is made conspicuous by a fascinating play on words in the verses. After the final results of the counting are recorded, the verse (1:49) states that '*ach et mateh Levi lo **tifkod*** – But the Tribe of Levi you shall not count'. The very next verse, however, uses the same word seemingly to convey the opposite: '*V'atah **hafked** et haLeviim*'. Citing Onkelos, Rashi explains that the root *pakad* has a dual meaning. In the first verse it means 'count', while in the second it means 'appoint'. The Leviim, then, are not to be counted together with the rest of the people because they have a special responsibility, i.e., to attend to the Mishkan.

In another use of this word, the Seforno (d. 1550) adds, there is a more specific allusion to how the Leviim related to the census. '*V'haLeviim ... lo **hotpakdu** b'tocham* – The Leviim were not counted among them'. The rare verb form of this word carries both a passive and a reflexive connotation; the Leviim were not counted by those responsible for the census, nor did they prepare themselves for counting by presenting themselves to the census officers. Thus, we find that the Leviim knew before the counting began that they would have a special role to play and they were not to be included with the rest of the people. This self-awareness of the Leviim was historic.

Rabbeinu Bachye cites a Midrash that the Levites were chosen because they stepped forward to support Moshe in the aftermath of the Golden Calf. In the words of the Midrash, 'One who draws near [to matters of holiness] a little, Hashem draws them even closer'.

Leadership Pitfalls

In a surprising twist, though, the Baal HaTurim throws a very different perspective on the word *pakad*. He notes that the only other place that this word is used in this form is in the verse, '*Hafked alav rasha* – Appoint over him an evildoer' (Tehillim 109:6). About this, the Sages comment that 'once a person is appointed to a position of authority, they are considered an evildoer in Heaven' (*Sanhedrin* 103b). The Baal HaTurim seems to be insinuating that by the Leviim being singled out, they were not necessarily being designated for greatness.

The Rambam (Peirush HaMishnah, Avot 1:10) sheds light on the Sages' statement. Commenting on the Mishnah (ibid.) that states, 'Hate lordship', the Rambam writes that with the pursuit of lordship over others, a person is likely to be led to many challenges. People are naturally jealous and resentful of being ruled by others, and a position of authority can often be an invitation for unscrupulous manipulation. In these statements, the Sages were expressing the circumspection a person must have when they are presented with power over other people. While a person certainly should not shirk taking charge when necessary, it is essential to maintain some healthy self-suspicion to ensure that one is not abusing the authority that devolves on them. Thus, the Leviim, at the same time as being treated differently than



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the rest of the people, are told to understand the dangers of standing out.

Another striking illustration of this message is found in the final verses of the parshah. Here the Leviim are told about their duties of transporting the various parts of the Mishkan when the people travelled. Before the vessels are to be picked up by the Leviim, however, the Kohanim must cover them with cloths. While this is happening, the Leviim are exhorted, in the strongest of terms, not to gaze at the vessels while they are being covered. As the Ohr HaChaim explains, there is a danger that the Leviim, with their enthusiasm for their tremendous responsibility, might overstep the mark and behave flippantly. It is essential, warns the verses, that every person recognises and keeps to their specific role. The Kohanim were meant to cover the vessels, and even the Leviim, who were meant to carry them, may not gaze at them before they are covered.

Interpreting these verses homiletically, the Chatam Sofer gives an incisive message for leadership in general. When warning the Leviim not to gaze at the vessels as they are being covered, the verse uses an interesting expression: '*Lo yavo'u lir'ot k'vala et ha-kodesh*'. Literally, this means that the Leviim should not look 'as the holiness is absorbed'. According to the Chatam Sofer, this is a warning to all leaders not to see themselves as having 'absorbed all the holiness'. A truly faithful leader knows that they are a shepherd only because there are sheep. However great a leader may be, they must understand that they are not indispensable and their position exists only in order for them to serve their congregants.

Making it Count

Looking at the description of the general census, we again find this dual connotation. The phrase used for counting the people is '*naso et rosh*' (1:2). Translated literally, this means to 'lift the heads' of the people, and throughout *Tanach*, this phrase is used equally to mean 'to uplift' or, surprisingly, 'to lift off the heads' or 'to execute'. Indeed, the individual nature of this counting - the verse emphasises that each person is counted 'according to his name' - highlights the significance of every person in the nation. On the other hand, though, it is noteworthy that almost none of the people counted here survived the Wilderness and reached Eretz Yisrael.

On the other hand, in the later census in Parshat Pinchas, there is no mention of individual names. The focus of that census is on families and community groups, and significantly, as the Seforno points out, it is the people who were counted in that census who actually succeeded in reaching Eretz Yisrael.

Here we find the key to our paradox. On the one hand, bringing each individual into the spotlight is important; each person has their unique contribution to make. But no one can see themselves in isolation. Real success is found only where the individuals find their places within their communities, applying a sense of humility and understanding their place in the wider picture. Ultimately, the true value of being counted is the contribution that this enables.

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