



Bamidbar – Making the Honor Roll

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

“The Lord spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting on the first day of the second month, in the second year after the exodus from the land of Egypt, saying. Take the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by families following their fathers' houses; a head count of every male according to the number of their names.” (Bamidbar 1:1-2)

The fourth book of the Torah begins in a rather non-dramatic fashion: a count, a simple tallying of the tribes. But why was this necessary? At first glance it would appear this was done in preparation for entry into the Land of Israel. The Jewish people would have to raise an army to fight against the indigenous nations of Canaan. God commands Moshe to count the men from age twenty in order to ascertain the size of the national fighting force. However, Levi is counted separately from the other tribes and is reckoned from the age of one month. *Rashi* explains the count was not to gauge the size of the potential army, rather, “*Mitoch Chibasan L'fanav Moneh Osam B'Chol Shaah* (Because of [God's] love for the [Jewish people]; He counts them at every moment.)” This was not a utilitarian count, it was a love count, to show how much He cares about us as a nation and as individuals.

But then something fascinating occurs. “*These are the descendants of Moses and Aaron on the day that the Lord spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai. These are the names of the sons of Aaron: Nadab the firstborn Abihu, Elazar, and Ithamar.*” (Bamidbar 3:1-2) The Torah begins to list the offspring of Aharon and Moshe and yet, only Aharon's children are mentioned and Moshe's are not. What is the meaning of this omission? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) explains:

“For in all these chapters of numbers, only those are mentioned of the dead who formed the separate branches of the tribes and families, but of the living only those are named who had some official public position as Nesiim (tribal princes) and Kohanim (priests). But our Moses allowed his sons to be quite absorbed in the masses without any special distinction, he did not even have a small position, a tiny title, a small badge for his own children.” (Bamidbar 3:1)

There were two different groups of individuals listed in the counting. Those who founded the major families and had since died and those who became contributors and assumed active positions of leadership within the Jewish people. Moshe's sons are not counted by name (though they are included in the total tally) because they did not contribute to the Jewish people in a substantive manner. Aharon's sons were given the mantle of the priesthood. They served and they contributed.

Our precious Torah is conveying to us a truly profound lesson. Life is about rolling up your sleeves and seeing what you can do to advance your family, your community, your people and your world. Too often, we sit back and expect others to do for us, to give to us and to provide for us. Too often, we expect that others will do the heavy lifting while we sit on the side and benefit from the fruits of their labor. This unfortunate mindset is prevalent in many areas of life. Spouses assume that the other will do the necessary work to improve the marriage saying, “I'm ready and willing to have a blissful marriage, but you, my significant other should do all the work.” Parents want their children to be committed and passionate Jews but sometimes fail to be true spiritual role-models. We are quick to point out the flaws in our schools, shuls, communities, leaders and nation, but are we committed enough to actually work to improve them?

The counting conducted in the beginning of *Bamidbar* is no ordinary count. It is the “who's who” of the Jewish people. It is the Judaic honor role that pays homage to those who dedicated themselves to advancing the nationhood and destiny of the Jewish people. For whatever the reason, Moshe's children did not follow in the footsteps of their illustrious father. They did not lead lives of committed contribution; they did not dedicate their abilities and talents to the Jewish nation.

Our goal is to forge a meaningful identity that will continue to inspire even when we are no longer here. We must roll up our sleeves. We have to work, we have to contribute. We cannot be spectators in our personal, communal and national lives. We must rise to the occasion and make a difference whenever and wherever we can. This Shabbos we read the names of men who lived thousands of years ago but through whose efforts we live today. Let us become the kind of people whose efforts will shape the world in which we live and whose memory will inspire for generations to come.