

The ache and pain of Numbers (*Bemidbar*)

The Hebrew name for the fourth book of the Torah which we will begin reading this week is *Bemidbar* (meaning, 'desert'), while its English name is *Numbers*. The reason why it is called *Bemidbar* is because this entire book is set in the barren Sinai desert where Bnei Yisrael were only able to survive due to miraculous food (*manna*), a miraculous well, and miraculous protective clouds, while the reason why it is called *Numbers* is because it begins with a census (and which is therefore why our Rabbis also refer to this book as *Sefer HaPekudim* – 'The Book of Counting').

Still, the question I would like to consider is the relationship between these two names - *Bemidbar* and *Numbers* - and specifically, the possible reasons why some of the numbers listed in our *parasha* are as they are.

Parshat Bemidbar begins by delineating the count of the 12 tribes of Israel, listing the number of males in each tribe aged 20 and older 'who were fit for service' (*Bemidbar* 1:3): Reuven (46,500), Shimon (59,300), Gad (46,650), Yehuda (74,600), Yissachar (54,400), Zevulun (57,400), Ephraim (40,500), Menashe (32,200), Binyamin (35,400), Dan (62,700), Asher (41,500), Naphtali (53,400).

As is clear from *Bemidbar* 1:3, this count was intended to evaluate the military capacity of *Bnei Yisrael* - which is why women were not counted as women did not generally go out to battle.

However, aside from the omission of women, a further group is also missing from this initial list – namely, the *Levi'im*. As the Torah proceeds to explain (see *Bemidbar* 1:47, 49), this omission was intentional because rather than being counted for military service, the *Levi'im* would be counted separately as their task was to carry and service the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle).

Of course, this was not God's initial plan. Instead, as our *parsha* explains (see *Bemidbar* 3:12-13), God had intended that all firstborns would be committed to serve Him. However, due to the involvement of the firstborns in the sin of the *Egel HaZahav* (Golden Calf) and given the choice of the tribe of Levi not to participate in that sin, God replaced the former with the latter.

Accordingly, we are then informed of two further numbers: 1) The number of male *Levi'im* aged from 1 month and upwards, and 2) The number of male firstborns aged from 1 month and upwards.

In terms of the *Levi'im*, the number recorded by the Torah (see *Bemidbar* 3:39) is 22,000, while the number of firstborns is 22,273 (*ibid.* 3:43). As should be clear, the point being made here is that these two groups are of almost exactly the same size, and thus, the *Levi'im* could – both quantitatively and qualitatively - replace the firstborns in their service (*ibid.* 3:45).

However, these two numbers raise two significant questions:

- 1) Given the size of all the other tribes (with the smallest, Menashe, numbering 32,200, and the largest, Yehuda, numbering 74,600), why is the tribe of Levi so small especially since the other tribes were counted aged 20 and older, while the tribe of Levi was counted from aged 1 month upwards?
- 2) Given the fact that the total number of the 12 tribes (aside from the tribe of Levi) was 603,550 (see *Bemidbar* 1:46), how can it possibly be that the total number of firstborn males, aged 1 month and older, was 22,273? Surely, the number should have been something like 300,000?!

The Ramban (see his commentary to *Bemidbar* 3:14) answers this first question by explaining that because the tribe of Levi were not subjugated by the crushing labour in Egypt, they were also not the beneficiaries of the blessing of multiple births while Bnei Yisrael were in Egypt (see *Shemot* 1:12). Accordingly, while the rest of the tribes grew exponentially, the tribe of Levi, '*multiplied in the usual manner but did not proliferate exceedingly like the rest of the tribes.*'

However, our second question is seemingly much harder to answer. How can it possibly be that the total number of firstborn males within *Bnei Yisrael* was just 22,273?

While Rabbi Avraham Bornstein suggests (in his *Resisei Tal* commentary to the Torah) that it must be that many firstborns were killed or died in a plague following the sin of the Golden Calf, the most obvious answer is suggested by Rabbi Yehuda Henkin (in his *Chibah Yeteira* Torah insights found at the end of Vol. 2 of his *Responsa Bnei Banim*), who explains that, '*the majority of women had miscarriages while in Egypt due to the enslavement and distress that they experienced, and this is why there were very few firstborns.*'

Significantly, this high mortality rate for unborn children and for young babies is further implied by the fact that the firstborn count was of those who were one month and older. And why was this so? Because many of those who were born did not survive more than 30 days (see *Shabbat* 135b). What this tells us is that **the majority of the women in Bnei Yisrael suffered a miscarriage, stillbirth, or the early death of their firstborn** either while they were in Egypt or between then and this point (just over a year after the Exodus).

As we may imagine, the counting of the firstborn, which would have highlighted the huge dissonance between the size of Bnei Yisrael and the number of surviving firstborns would have stirred up many difficult memories and emotions, and this then brings me back to the two names of this book, *Bemidbar* and *Numbers*, because by being reminded of these numbers, the women and men of *Bnei Yisrael* were also being reminded of the tragic losses of so many firstborn (and likely subsequent)

babies as a result of their hard labour. And what then is the connection between *Bemidbar* and *Numbers*? It is because by reflecting on these numbers, these women and men would have felt bereft of the fruit of their womb just like a desert struggles to grow fruit-bearing trees.

If you know someone who has unfortunately experienced a loss at miscarriage, or a stillbirth, or the death of a younger or older child, you will know that discussing the number of children that they have is very hard and very painful. This is because no child is just a number to a parent, and the memory of an unborn or deceased child never goes away.

On this basis there is a deep connection between *Bemidbar* and *Numbers* with the lesson here being that whenever we meet people, we should be sensitive to the fact that they may well have experienced a loss. So rather than asking them questions about their 'numbers' (eg. How many children do you have?), take a moment to consider the fact that they may well have experienced a loss, and that your question may trigger them to become emotionally lost in their *Midbar* (Desert) of pain.

Before concluding I would like to add one final thought. It is customary to read *Parshat Bemidbar* before *Shavuot*, and on *Shavuot* we read Megillat Ruth which begins by describing the personal losses of Ruth, Orpah and Naomi. As we know, Orpah then returns to her home country. However, Ruth insists on staying by Naomi's side: '*wherever you go, I will go*' (*Ruth* 1:16).

Sometimes we are hit with pain, hardship and loss. But knowing that there are other people around us means that while we live with pain, we are not alone in our pain - and it was this blessing and reassurance that Ruth provided to Naomi.

In the same vein, while *Parshat Bemidbar* lists the numbers of *Bnei Yisrael*, we are also told how *Bnei Yisrael* camped together. Yes, so many of our ancestors lost so many children through miscarriage, stillbirth, or the death of a younger or older child. Yet there is something very comforting in the image of the *Machane Yisrael* – the Israelite camp – which reminds us that while *Bnei Yisrael* were physically in the *Midbar* (Desert), and while the census may have stirred up their loss and their pain, they were not alone in their pain. Instead, just as they had journeyed to the *Midbar* together as a people, they knew that wherever they would go, they would not be alone.

Shabbat Shalom!