

PARSHAT BAMIDBAR
NUMBERS 1:1-4:20
HAFTARAH I SAMUEL 20:18-42
27 IYYAR 5786/14 MAY 2026



Taking the Census
Francis William Edmonds

TAKING ACCOUNT OF THE PEOPLE

1. “Take a census of the whole Israelite community.” (Numbers 1:2)

שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עֵדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
נָשָׂא - vb., to lift, to lift up, to raise

2. What awareness does counting promote?
 - a. Differentiation, separation, distinctiveness
 - b. That each is part, only part, “that no one is everything, that apart from this part that one has, there is never nothing, but always others.” (Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*)
3. There were 600,000 people who received Torah. The Torah has 600,000 possible interpretations. The reason it was given to an entire people is so that it would reflect all possible holy meanings. (Maharsha)

4. "Raise" signifies elevation. By means of counting the number of all the tribes, each individual will experience elevation, and a special significance will be seen in each one. This is as it is written in Hosea 2:1, "And the number of the children of Israel will be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or counted." The greatness of God is seen in the entire community of Israel as a whole, and if just one member of that community is missing then the mixture will be deficient. Each one of Israel is a portion of God. Each individual possesses one of the attributes of God, and at the time when that individual is counted, then God Godself is present in that attribute. This is how each member of Israel has a special state of elevation. (Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza, Mei HaShiloach)
5. Each and every Jew has a particular knowledge of God's greatness. Each of us becomes excited by a different quality or aspect of a religious life. Each of us has some specific task to perform in the eyes of God, and for that reason we were created. (Sefat Emet)
6. It is as if the multiplicity of persons were the prerequisite for the fullness of absolute truth, as if each person, by his or her uniqueness, ensured the revelation of a unique aspect of truth, and that some of its aspects would never be revealed if some members of humanity were missing. This suggests that the totality of truth is made up of the contributions of multiple persons; the uniqueness of each reaction bearing the secret of the text; the voice of Revelation precisely in as much as it is inflected by the ear of each person, would be necessary for the Whole Truth. (Emmanuel Levinas)
7. Whoever saves a single life, is as though he saved an entire world. (Talmud)
8. Where the ultimate reality is power, what matters is the totality, not the individual. The purpose of a biblical census was not to quantify but to affirm the worth of each individual in the totality of Torah and a society constructed around the idea of the holy. (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks)