

**Bemidbar: On Counting Persons for War and for Peace**  
**Rabbi Eliot Malomet June 8, 2024 2 Sivan 5784**

שאו את ראש כל עדת בני ישראל למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר שמות כל זכר לגלגלתם.	<b>Take up the head-count of the entire community of the Children of Israel, by their clans, by their Fathers' Houses, according to the number of names, every male per capita... (Num. 1:2)</b>
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

What was the purpose of the census? According to Jacob Milgram and others, it was for military conscription in order to be able to plan strategically for the coming conquest of the land. There are other biblical examples of census-taking: prior to military campaigns (Josh. 8:10) and after a campaign (Num. 31:48-49). Statistical information pertaining to the size and composition of armies is crucial to this very day. Likewise, the number of casualties incurred in a battle, or a war helps us comprehend their scale and complexity. This past week (June 6) we commemorated the 80th anniversary of D-Day. To comprehend the scale of this invasion, here are the statistics:

<b>Ships and landing craft</b>	<b>6,939</b>
<b>Aircraft</b>	<b>11,590</b>
<b>Bombs dropped</b>	<b>7,616 tons</b>
<b>Naval personnel</b>	<b>195,000</b>
<b>Invading force</b>	<b>160,000</b>
<b>Killed</b>	<b>~4,415 (~2.76%)</b>
<b>Wounded</b>	<b>~5,000</b>
<b>Missing</b>	<b>~885</b>



By June 30, over 850,000 men, 148,000 vehicles, and 570,000 tons of supplies had landed on the shores of Normandy. (Eisenhower Presidential Lib.)

An estimated 4,000 of the total D-Day force were Jews, of them, 52 were killed. May their memories be a blessing. In total, approximately 1.5 million Jews served in WWII.

<b>USA</b>	<b>550,000</b>
<b>USSR</b>	<b>500,000</b>
<b>Poland</b>	<b>100,000</b>
<b>Free Polish Forces</b>	<b>10,000</b>
<b>Britain</b>	<b>60,000</b>
<b>Mandatory Palestine</b>	<b>30,000</b>
<b>Canada</b>	<b>17,000</b>
<b>Australia</b>	<b>4,000</b>
<b>Partisans (Eastern Europe)</b>	<b>30,000</b>
<b>French Resistance</b>	<b>75,000</b>



Statistics have been important in order to frame the current war in Israel. At the start of the war, approximately 350,000 Israeli troops were mobilized. Casualties as of June 5:

<b>IDF SOLDIERS</b>	<b>On Oct. 7</b>	<b>After Oct. 7</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Killed</b>	<b>351</b>	<b>295</b>	<b>646</b>
<b>Lightly wounded</b>	<b>1271</b>	<b>912</b>	<b>2183</b>
<b>Moderately wounded</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>600</b>	<b>967</b>
<b>Severely wounded</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>370</b>	<b>570</b>
<b>Total wounded</b>			<b>3720</b>
<b>Hostages taken on Oct. 7</b>	<b>255</b>		
<b>Hostages Released</b>		<b>131</b>	
<b>Hostages Declared dead</b>		<b>43</b>	
<b>Remaining Hostages presumed alive</b>			<b>81</b>
<b>May they be freed!</b>			

There is a longstanding aversion in Jewish custom and folklore to counting people. Perhaps the classic source for this is found in the earlier census in Exodus 30:12

כי תשא את ראש בני ישראל לפקדיהם ונתנו איש כפר נפשו לה' בפקד אתם ולא יהיה בהם נגף בפקד אתם.	<b>When you take up the head-count of the Children of Israel, in counting them, they are to give, each-man, a ransom for his life, for God, when they count them, that there be no plague on them, when they count them.</b>
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Each individual was to give a half-shekel as a ransom, that is, a monetary contribution that was intended to elicit divine protection from plague and pestilence. In order to prevent the actual counting of persons, the half-shekels were counted, and the census total was derived from the total amount that was collected. Rashi, commenting on that verse tries to explain the link between a census and a possible calamity: **שהמנין שולט בו עין הרע-numbers (i. e. things that have been numbered) are subject to the influence of the "evil eye"**. This idea found fertile soil in the Jewish folk imagination such that, to this very day, superstitious Jews will refrain from counting people. For example, when counting for a minyan they will say something like, "Not one, not two," etc., and they will obfuscate when asked how many grandchildren or great-grandchildren they have, out of fear of the "evil eye." But we might be able to put a different gloss on this sentiment. Contemporary Israeli scholar, R. Yoel Bin Nun writes as follows:

1. אסור לספר אנשים כי "לכל איש יש שם". אנשים אינם מספרים. גדולי הצוררים הפכו אנשים למספרים בלבד.  
**1. It is prohibited to count people because "To every person there is a name." People are not numbers. The greatest oppressors have reduced persons to numbers.**
2. אסור לספר עם לספוק גאות שליטים ולהבטחת שלטונם. אלא רק למטרה ראויה הקשורה לקדש, ובדרך של כפרת נפשות.  
**2. It is prohibited to count a population to satisfy the vanity of rulers and to secure their power; one can count**

<i>only for a purpose that is connected to holiness, and in order to enable ransom or atonement (prevention of calamity in the biblical context).</i>
3. אם פוקדים חילים לצרכי הצבא, עושים זאת רק מגיל גיוס, ולפי הצורך.
3. <i>If it is for the purpose of war, a census is conducted only from the age of enlistment, according to need.</i>
מפקד אכלוסין מודרני ומספרי זהות הסברו בצרכי תכנון ונהול של תקציבי המדינה והתירו משום כך, ועדיין שוחרת מרירות בלב רבים המרגישים 'שקופים' ביחס של משדדי השלטון ושאלים: 'האם סופרים אותנו?'
<i>The modern census and ID numbers (such as Social Security) can be justified on the basis that they are necessary for planning and the administration of budgets (and the like) and are therefore permitted. Nevertheless, there remains a residual bitterness in the hearts of many individuals who feel invisible to the powers that be and ask, 'Do we not count?'</i>

Already in the bible there is an association with numbering people and the possibility of calamity. From the earliest times, this idea became part of folklore, superstition and custom. But at the root of this idea, is a fundamentally human need: to be recognized as a person, a human being, with an identity, a name, a life, and not a number. The strategy of tattooing Jews in Auschwitz was deliberately intended to strip them of their humanity. Undoubtedly, the searing residue of that experience remains present in Jewish consciousness up to this day. Nevertheless, in order to study social trends and demographics, especially for the sake of public policy, one has to resort to numbers. While census data enables us to understand our populations and adequately administer them, Jewish tradition has always reminded us that every person is an entire world.

אלה פקודי בני ישראל לבית אבתם כל פקודי המחנות לצבאתם שש מאות אלף ושלושת אלפים וחמש מאות וחמשים.	<i>These [are] the accountings of the Children of Israel by their Fathers' Houses, all the accountings of the camps, by their forces: six hundred thousand and three thousand and five hundred and fifty. (Num. 2:32)</i>
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

On the one hand, the Torah gives us a specific number. On the other hand, we are told elsewhere - like in the first verse of this week's haftarah from Hosea 2 - that *The number of the people of Israel shall be like that of the sands of the sea, which cannot be measured or counted. (Hosea 2:1)* The Torah uses a variety of metaphors to describe the limitlessness of Israel's population. When Abraham separates from Lot, God says to him, *I will make your seed like the dust of the earth, so that if a man were able to measure the dust of the earth, so too could your seed be measured. (Gen. 13:15)* Later on, after the Akedah, God reiterates the promise: *indeed, I will*

*bless you, bless you, I will make your seed many, yes, many, like the stars of the heavens and like the sand that is on the shore of the sea...* (Gen. 22:17) The use of these metaphors, *dust, sand, and stars*, sparked the rabbinic imagination.

**DUST:**  
מה עפר הארץ מסוף העולם ועד סופו, כך בניה יהיו מפגרים מסוף העולם ועד סופו, ומה עפר הארץ אינו מתברך אלא במים, אף ישראל אינו מתברך אלא בזכות התורה שנמשלה למים. ומה עפר מבלה את כלי מתכות והוא קים לעולם, כך ישראל כל עובדי כוכבים בטלים והם קמים. ומה עפר עשויה דיש, אף בניה עשויה דיש לעובדי כוכבים.  
*Just as the dust of the earth is found from one end of the earth to the other, so your descendants will be dispersed from one end of the earth to the other. Just as the dust of the earth becomes blessed only through water [rain], so Israel is blessed only through the merit of the Torah, which is likened to water. Just as dust wears out metal vessels and endures forever, so, too, with Israel – all the idolaters will vanish, but they will endure. Just as dust is regularly trodden, so your descendants will be regularly trodden by the idolaters. (Gen. Rabbah 41:9)*

It's fascinating where the metaphor takes us. It represents dispersion, but also vitality; Jews are all over the world, and when mixed with the life-elixir of Torah, bring blessing to the world. Jews are objects of contempt to idolaters, yet the granular truths of Judaism will ultimately prevail against sparkling lure of idolatry. But oppression and persecution from those who have contempt for Jews, is also a pervasive reality of the Jewish experience.

**SAND:**  
כחול הים, מה דרכו של חול אדם מכניסו לאור ומוציאו בולים ועושיין הימנו כלי זכוכית, כך ישראל נכנסין לאור ויוציאין חיים.  
*Like the sand of the sea, just as typically a person places sand into the fire and takes it out as chunks, and they craft glass vessels from it, so the people of Israel enter into the fire and emerge alive. (Bemidbar Rabbah 2:13)*



Sand changes to glass when subjected to intense heat. The intense persecution to which Jews are subjected does not destroy us; it transforms us into a durable and vibrant people.

**STARS:**  
מה הכוכבים חולקין כבוד זה לזה ושלוה ביניהם, שנאמר (איוב כה, ב): עשה שלום במרומו, כך הם הצדיקים אוהבים זה לזה, כשם שהכוכבים אינם מריבין זה עם זה, כך הם הצדיקים.  
*Just as the stars accord honor to one another, and there is peace between them, as it is stated: "He makes peace in His heights" (Job 25:2), so the righteous love one another. Just as the stars do not quarrel with one another, so it is with the righteous.*



When God says to Abraham, *I will make you descendants like the stars in heaven*, it is not only a statement about quantity. But quality! Shabbat Shalom!

This parasha sheet is sponsored by Nanette and Dave Cohen in honor of the marriage of their son/stepson Joel Petraroli to Rachel Sanborn. Mazel tov!

DAY 246. MAY THE HOSTAGES BE FREED! MAY GOD SHIELD AND PROTECT THE IDF.