



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Leading a Nation of Individuals

במדבר

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The book of Bamidbar begins with a census of the Israelites. That is why this book is known in English as *Numbers*. This raises a number of questions: what is the significance of this act of counting? And why here at the beginning of the book? Besides which, there have already been two previous censuses of the people and this is the third within the space of a single year. Surely one would have been sufficient. Additionally, does counting have anything to do with leadership?

The place to begin is to note what appears to be a contradiction. On the one hand, Rashi says that the acts of counting in the Torah are gestures of love on the part of God:

Because they (the Children of Israel) are dear to Him, God counts them often. He counted them when they were about to leave Egypt. He counted them after the Golden Calf to establish how many were left. And now that He was about to cause His Presence to rest on them (with the inauguration of the Sanctuary), He counted them again.

Rashi to [Bamidbar 1:1](#)

When God initiates a census of the Israelites, it is to show that He loves them.

On the other hand, the Torah is explicit in saying that taking a census of the nation is fraught with risk:

Then God said to Moses, “When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each must give to God a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them.”

Ex. 30:11-12

When, centuries later, King David counted the people, there was Divine anger and seventy thousand people died.^[1] How can this be, if counting is an expression of love?

The answer lies in the phrase the Torah uses to describe the act of counting: *se’u et rosh*, literally, “lift the head.” (Num. 1:2) This is a strange, circumlocutory expression. Biblical Hebrew contains many verbs meaning “to count”: *limnot*, *lifkod*, *lispur*, *lachshov*. Why does the Torah not use these simple words for the census, choosing instead the roundabout expression, “lift the heads” of the people?

The short answer is this: In any census, count or roll-call there is a tendency to focus on the total – the crowd, the multitude, the mass. Here is a nation of sixty million people, or a company with one hundred thousand employees, or a sports crowd of sixty thousand. Any total tends to value the group or nation as a whole. The larger the total, the stronger the army, the more popular the team, and the more successful the company.

Counting devalues the individual and tends to make him or her replaceable. If one soldier dies in battle, another will take their place. If one person leaves the organisation, someone else can be hired to do their job.

Notoriously, too, crowds have the effect of tending to make the individual lose their independent judgment and follow what others are doing. We call this “herd behaviour,” and it sometimes leads to collective madness. In 1841 Charles Mackay published his classic study, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, which tells of the South Sea Bubble that cost thousands of people their money in the 1720s, and the tulip mania in Holland when entire fortunes were spent on single tulip bulbs. The Great Crashes of 1929 and 2008 had the same crowd psychology.

Another great work, Gustav Le Bon’s *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895) showed how crowds exercise a “magnetic influence” that transmutes the behaviour of individuals into a collective “group mind.” As he put it, “An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other

grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will.” People in a crowd become anonymous. Their conscience is silenced. They lose a sense of personal responsibility.

Crowds are peculiarly prone to regressive behaviour, primitive reactions and instinctual behaviour. They are easily led by figures who are demagogues, playing on people’s fears and their sense of victimhood. Such leaders, Le Bon noted, are “especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous excitable half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness,”^[2] a remarkable anticipation of Hitler. It is no accident that Le Bon’s work was published in France at a time of rising antisemitism and the Dreyfus trial.

Hence the significance of one remarkable feature of Judaism: its principled insistence – like no other civilisation before – on the dignity and integrity of the individual. We believe that every human being was created in the image and likeness of God. The Sages said that every life is like an entire universe.^[3] Maimonides wrote that each of us should see ourselves as if our next act could change the fate of the world.^[4] Every dissenting view is carefully recorded in the Mishnah, even if the law is otherwise. Every verse of the Torah is capable, said the Sages, of seventy interpretations. No voice, no view, is silenced. Judaism never allows us to lose our individuality in the mass.

There is a wonderful blessing mentioned in the Talmud to be said on seeing six hundred thousand Israelites together in one place. It is: “Blessed are You, Lord... who discerns secrets.”^[5] The Talmud explains that every person is different. We each have different attributes. We all think our own thoughts. Only God can enter the minds of each of us and know what we are thinking, and this is what the blessing refers to. In other words, even in a massive crowd where, to human eyes, faces blur into a mass, God still relates to us as individuals, not as members of a crowd.

That is the meaning of the phrase, “lift the head,” used in the context of a census. God tells Moses that there is a danger, when counting a nation, that each individual will feel insignificant. “What am I? What difference can I make? I am only one of millions, a mere wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the sea-shore, dust on the surface of infinity.”

Against that, God tells Moses to lift people’s heads by showing that they each count; they matter as individuals.

Indeed in Jewish law a *davar she-be-minyan*, something that is counted, sold individually rather than by weight, is never nullified even in a mixture of a thousand or a million others.^[6] In Judaism, taking a census must always be done in such a way as to signal that we are valued as individuals. We each have unique gifts. There is a contribution only I can bring. To lift someone’s head means to show them favour, to recognise them. It is a gesture of love.

There is, however, all the difference in the world between *individuality* and *individualism*. Individuality means that I am a unique and valued member of a team. Individualism means that I am not a team player at all. I am interested in myself alone, not the group. Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam gave this a famous name, noting that more people than ever in the United States are going ten-pin bowling, but fewer than ever are joining bowling teams. He called this phenomenon “Bowling alone.”^[7] MIT professor Sherry Turkle calls our age of Twitter, Facebook, and electronic rather than face-to-face friendships, “Alone together.”^[8] Judaism values individuality, not individualism. As Hillel said, “If I am only for myself, what am I?”^[9]

All this has implications for Jewish leadership. We are not in the business of counting numbers. The Jewish people always was small and yet achieved great things. Judaism has a profound mistrust of demagogic leaders who manipulate the emotions of crowds. Moses at the Burning Bush spoke of his inability to be eloquent. “I am not a man of words” (Ex. 4:10). He thought this was a deficiency in a leader. In fact, it was the opposite. Moses did not sway people by his oratory. Rather, he lifted them by his teaching.

A Jewish leader has to respect individuals. They must “lift their heads.” If you seek to lead, however small or large the group you lead, you must always communicate the value you place on everyone, including those others exclude: the widow, the orphan and the stranger. You must never attempt to sway a crowd by appealing to the primitive emotions of fear or hate. You must never ride roughshod over the opinions of others.

It is hard to lead a nation of individuals, but this is the most challenging, empowering, inspiring leadership of all.

[1] 2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21.

[2] Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd*, London, Fisher Unwin 1896, 134.

[3] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:4.

[4] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4.

[5] Brachot 58a.

[6] Beitsah 3b.

[7] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000.

[8] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York, Basic Books, 2011.

[9] Mishnah Avot 1:14.



1. Why do you think a census was taken just before the inauguration of the Mishkan?
2. What is the difference between a great leader who gives inspiring speeches to crowds, and a dangerously dictator who gives stirring oratories to the masses?
3. Jewish law follows the majority rule – how can it do this while also valuing every individual's opinion? (Hint: how are *halachic* decisions made and recorded in the Gemara?)