

Dear Chavraya,

Having been on hold for some time, a receptionist finally answered as I sought to make a medical appointment for my father. She asked what his hospital ID number was. Not having it in front of me, I told her that I didn't know, adding then, "but I know his name." "All right," she said, "what is his name," as she then added, "but his number would be more helpful." Trying to evince some understanding, I mused on the sad reality of a number being preferable to a name. I thought of the long ago punch card warning, "do not fold, spindle, or mutilate," and the ironic question it gives rise to, what about people?

That was my question as I entered this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'midbar*, the first portion of the fourth book of the Torah, "what about people?" Immediately after the backdrop is set in time and space by the first verse, the first words of the next verse call for a census to be taken, *s'u et rosh/raise up the head*, as we might speak of "counting heads." The question emerges immediately, "what about people?" Does a census simply reduce people to numbers, actuarial statistics, or does it underscore each one's place as part of a greater whole, helping us to see the community, the society, as a responsive reflection of individuals? Beyond the dry details of numbering people and tribes, beautiful teaching weaves through *Parashat B'midbar* concerning the tension between the individual and society, ourselves and our communities.

That tension, in Heschel's terms, a "polarity" that seeks to be fine-tuned, finds harmony immediately. The same verse that begins with the "counting of heads," a simple numbering, then requires a counting of names, *mispar shemot*. On reading these words, I thought immediately of my interaction with the receptionist. Not to unfairly expect more of her than much of our society encourages, I thought how nice it would be to say something like, "it would be helpful to have your father's ID number, but I would like to know his name as well." A little further on in the *parasha*, the same tension is addressed in organizing the tribes for encampment, each arranged in its own place around the *Mishkan*, the desert sanctuary. That is the key, that each tribe has its own place, its own identity. Identity is expressed through a flag or banner, *ish al diglo v'otot l'vet avotam/each one shall camp next to their standard, each designated with the insignia of their ancestral house....* Each tribe has its own identity, but that individuals not be subsumed even within the smaller group, the micro-unit of the family is highlighted, hopefully even down to their smallest members, every child joyfully affirmed in the promise of their presence.

Warning against the dangers of unbridled individualism, of an arrogance and avarice that oversteps the place and presence of another, Judaism teaches of the sacred weave of individual and community. The individual is affirmed in the knowledge that they are needed. A dance of giving and receiving, from the gifts of each one the community is able to give back to all. The Izbetza Rebbe (1800-1854) teaches on the census in our *parsha*, *you shall stand each one in the place reserved for them/she'ta'amdu kol echad al makom ha'shayech lo*. Seeing collective loss in denial of individual place, he goes on to warn, *if you remove the place of one, there will not be a state of wholeness for the tribe/eyn matzav ha'shevet b'sh'laymut*. Also explaining the census as emphasizing the importance of each one, the Slonimer Rebbe teaches through the metaphor of Torah the mutual reliance of the individual and the community upon each other: *the totality of Israel illumines the Torah...; for there is to every Jewish soul their own letter to illuminate...; if a person would find wholeness, they always need to include them self... among the entire people of Israel..., then shall we merit to draw the entire light of the Torah....* To bask in the full brightness of Torah requires the unique insights that each one of us brings.

As each of our gifts is needed for the full flowering of our own people, so the gifts of every people is needed for the full flowering of humanity. In the requirement to count and name every Jew in the desert journey of our people, there is an essential teaching regarding the human journey. As we learn of the interplay between one gathering of individuals and their community, our own, so we learn of the interplay between the particular and the universal. In the gathering of all peoples into relationship with each other, the gifts of each one are needed for the full brightness of God's image to shine in every face. We are each as the receptionist on the line, needing to know the other as more than a number, a sacred name waiting to be heard.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor