

MAY 26, 2008

Parashat Bamidbar

Military Count

Kol yotzei tzava b'yisrael – “All that are able to go forth to war in Israel” (Numbers 1:3)

Each of the English names of the books of the Torah reflects the title given to the book in the Midrash. Bamidbar, the fourth book of the Torah, is referred to in English as Numbers because the rabbis called it *sefer hapekudim*, the book of the counting. Not surprisingly, the counting begins almost immediately, as Moses conducts a census. Yet Moses had recently counted the people when collecting the half-shekel coins for the construction of the Tabernacle. So why then does God command Moses to perform yet another census less than six months later? Explaining the need for the second count Rashbam teaches that, “Because from this point, the Jewish people need to travel to the Land of Israel, and people twenty years and above are proper to enter into the armed forces... For this reason, God commanded [Moses] to count them.” In essence, the book of Numbers begins with preparations to conquer the land of Israel.

God entrusts the Jewish people with the mission of ensuring a strong military capable of defeating the nations living in the Land and protecting and defending the Jewish people from attack. Nowadays, we also count towards Israel's defense. Yet, the most important count today is not the census of soldiers, which is of course vital, but the funds allotted to equip, arm and train those soldiers against the armies and terrorist forces devoted to Israel's destruction.

Thankfully, America remains dedicated to a strong Israel. Recently, American President George W. Bush stood in Israel before the Knesset and told the members of Israel's parliament, “I visited Masada, an inspiring monument to courage and sacrifice. At this historic site, Israeli soldiers swear an oath: Masada shall never fall again. Citizens of Israel: Masada shall never fall again, and America will be at your side.” Putting real meaning behind these words the administration's request for \$2.55 billion in security assistance for Israel in 2009 represents the first year of a 10-year U.S.-Israel security agreement to help the Jewish state face increasing threats. While U.S. assistance has long played an indispensable role in ensuring that Israel maintains its qualitative military edge over potential adversaries today's threat are more critical than ever. For more on U.S. aid to Israel follow the link [here](#).

This ongoing friendship between America and Israel is a testament to the mutual interests that our two countries share and to the hard work that goes into ensuring that Israel remains prominent in America's heart and mind. Ultimately as Americans we can ensure a full count for Israel's defense. ■

The Jewish Democracy

Eileh kerī'ei ha'eidah – “These were the elect of the congregation” (Numbers 1:16)

The Torah tells us that in order to facilitate the counting of the people God instructs Moses to appoint a *nasi* – literally a prince – to serve as the leader of each tribe. These men, whom the Torah refers to as *kerī'ei ha'eidah* (those who are called from the congregation), assume such great responsibility that the Torah mentions each one by name and yet the nature of their appointments remains unclear. Who calls them and how are they called? At first glance, it seems that they are called by God who knows who best has the abilities to lead the Jewish people. In fact, Ibn Ezra (on verse 16) explains that the Torah refers to the princes as the “called people” because the community would never do

anything before calling them for their input and leadership. Midrash Hagadol however offers a different perspective teaching that these leaders were “called by others, and they did not call upon (volunteer) themselves.” Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshitz notes that by referring to them as *keri’ei ha’eidah*, the text emphasizes that these leaders are chosen and accepted by the masses and are not appointed by God or Moses. Thus the leaders of the Jewish nation serve as the chosen representatives of the people and must be elected by and accountable to their constituencies.

From this textual nuance we discover that the notion of democracy has been at the heart of the Jewish community from the very beginnings of our nation. The very first representatives of the people received a mandate from their tribesmen and strove to lead with the interests of their people in mind.

This notion of democracy is a guiding force behind the modern State of Israel. As allies and models of democracy, America and Israel share these most critical common values. As House Minority Leader, John Boehner (R-OH) said, “Israel and the United States have a unique friendship based on our mutual commitment to democracy, freedom and peace.” Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), further commented, “We share a common history, nations founded to be beacons of democracy, forged by pioneers...in search of a better tomorrow.” These shared democratic values are the cornerstone of the special relationship that exists between the U.S. and Israel. But as the attacks of September 11th demonstrated, they also face common enemies. Both nations’ citizens have been targeted by Islamic terrorists, and both are threatened by radical regimes whose desire to kill us is stronger than their love of life.

The special friendship that exists between the U.S. and Israel is based on the bond of democracy. The enemies of Israel who would see her destroyed view her only as the “little Satan” and that it is America, the “great Satan,” who is their ultimate target. Just as God chose *nasi'im* that were wise we too must choose leaders who recognize friendship and shared values, leaders who support the U.S.-Israel relationship. ■

Handle with Care

Velo yavou lirot kevala et hakodesh vametu – “*But they shall not go in to see the holy things as they are being covered, lest they die.*” (Numbers 4:20)

In the final section of Bamidbar, God issues a stern warning that Moses should take great care to ensure the safety and security of the family of Kehat, who are given the responsibility of transporting the vessels of the Tabernacle from place to place. Moses and Aaron must carefully instruct the Levites regarding the process of the transport to ensure their safety, but what’s so dangerous about the job of moving furniture from one place to another? The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 85-89) explains simply that when they deconstructed the Tabernacle there was a danger that the Levites might come to personally see the Ark and thus receive the punishment, *karet*, or spiritual excommunication associated with seeing the Ark. For this reason God warns Moses that the Levites should take great care that they not allow the Ark to become uncovered, lest they see what they may not and pay the ultimate price.

This need for great care with extremely sensitive material resonates with us today as we contemplate a volatile Middle East and confront a world in which Iran continues to pursue nuclear technology.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said recently that the U.N. nuclear watchdog has failed in its latest attempts to investigate Iran's illicit nuclear program, the Associated Press reported. Moreover, a report by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies said that, "If Tehran's nuclear program is unchecked, there is reason for concern that it could in time prompt a regional cascade of proliferation among Iran's neighbors." Nuclear materials and technology – lethal and dangerous materials that must always be handled with great care – must never be allowed into the hands of terrorists or their state sponsors in Tehran. By continuing to support economic sanctions and divestment of state pension funds from this regime there is still time to stop Iran’s genocidal aspirations.

God’s warning to Moses reminds us to never take the handling of dangerous material lightly. If we do a horrible fate awaits both Israel and America. ■