

MAY 23, 2011

Parashat Bamidbar

Amazing Growth

Take a census of the entire assembly... (Numbers 1:2)

שאו את ראש כל עדת... (במדבר א:ב)

While Rashi (on 1:1) suggests that God instructed Moses to count the nation “out of love,” Ramban believes that the true reason for the census was to assign the tribes their places in the camp. Yet, he wonders “why God commanded that the total number be known” (see Ramban on 1:45). Answering his own question, Ramban states that “Perhaps [God did so] in order to let them [the Israelites] know of God’s kindness to them, for they descended to Egypt seventy souls, and now they were numerous as the sand of the sea with such and such numbers of those who were twenty years old.” With this understanding, we see that the census was not just conducted for logistical reasons, but also to help the nation appreciate just how much it had grown.

Just as Moses counted the Israelites to demonstrate their journey from a simple tribe to a bustling nation, many Jews recently took the occasion of Israel’s 63rd birthday to recognize the Jewish state’s incredible growth from a humble beginning to the technological wonder that is the modern state of Israel.

From a modest population of around 800,000 at its founding in 1948, Israel has grown in the past six-plus decades to a country of almost 7.7 million. The tiny state has absorbed millions of immigrants from more than 100 countries, including the former USSR, Ethiopia and those forced to flee from Arab countries. Israel’s growth has not only been demographic; its innovative society has become a world leader in technological development. The Jewish state has gone from a country born into unrelenting adversity to a nation of limitless progress, a beacon of innovation and ingenuity that is home to world-class universities and is a global giant in high-tech and medical innovations. The achievements of Israel are even more remarkable when one considers that the country possesses few natural resources—two-thirds of its land mass is arid desert. Turning this challenge on its head, Israel has developed agricultural techniques that enabled the nation to develop a worldwide reputation for “making the desert bloom.”

While we must focus much of our attention on the threats that Israel faces, the census in our *parashah* reminds us that sometimes we must look back in order to appreciate how much we have grown, and just how far we have come. ■

Every Single Citizen

According to their fathers’ household (Numbers 1:2)

ולבית אבותם (במדבר א:ב)

The Torah states that God commanded Moses to conduct the census “according to their families, according to their fathers’ household, by number of their names” (1:2). According to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (see Darosh Darash Yosef pp. 283-284), God instructed Moses to count the people in this unusual manner because in Jewish tradition every census has two goals. While the first goal is to “ascertain the total number of the Jewish nation...The second goal is to count in order to get to know each individual...It was not enough for Moses to know the total number of the Jewish people...It was as though God were telling him, ‘Moses, when you pray, you will pray not only for the general public, but also for every Jew in his or her moments of joy and pain.’”

Moses counted the people by their families to emphasize that true leaders act in the interest of each and every member of the nation. Sadly, recent events in Syria demonstrate that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad takes the opposite view of leadership.

Since protests against Assad's government began over two months ago, Syrian forces have engaged in a brutal campaign of repression which has included live fire and indiscriminate arrests. According to [Agence France Presse](#), "More than 850 people are believed to have been killed and another 8,000 arrested." In the midst of the ongoing turmoil in Syria, on May 15th "Thousands of protesters gathered on the Syrian side and hundreds flooded into the Israeli-held territory after flattening the border fence. Scores entered the Druze village of Majdal Shams, gathering in the central square, where they raised Palestinian flags," [The Washington Post](#) reported. These protesters were bused to the border from Palestinian refugee camps, and Syrian forces made no attempt to prevent them from reaching the border. According to some scholars with extensive knowledge of the Syrian regime, these protests represented a cynical attempt on the part of the Assad regime to distract from troubles at home by focusing on the Arab-Israeli conflict. "There's no question. You can't get anywhere near that fence without the Syrian army's permission," Andrew Tabler, a Syria expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, told [The Jerusalem Post](#). "It's almost a cliché—this is what [Assad] always does. He's under pressure at home, so he deflects attention."

Assad's behavior has resulted in hundreds of deaths and represents the antithesis of the Jewish view of leadership. Only when Syria has a leader who values every single citizen, will the Syrian people finally have a voice. ■

Seeking Peace First

You shall count them according to their ranks (Numbers 1:3)

תפקדו אותם לצבאתם (במדבר א:ג)

Parashat Bamidbar describes the division and reorganization of the tribes into a military formation and encampment, giving the impression that the Jewish nation was militaristic in its outlook. Yet, Rabbi Simcha Raz (see *Shivim Panim L'Torah*, Bamidbar p. 17) notes that in Judaism, military force is never the first option. In fact, the Jewish army was specifically commanded to "call out for peace" whenever it approached a city (See Deuteronomy 20:10-11). Rabbi Raz notes that this value overrode strategic concerns: "even if this call for peace caused great military harm, for the army thus loses the element of surprise, nonetheless, the Torah demands this of us to prevent unnecessary bloodshed."

While the Israelites always stood ready to protect and defend themselves, their willingness to give up their tactical advantage demonstrates the Jewish ethic of making sacrifices for the sake of peace. Even today, the state of Israel stands ready to live up to this legacy.

Speaking at the recent opening of the Knesset summer session, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his government's desire to reach a comprehensive agreement with the Palestinians despite the difficult sacrifices that settlement would require. Netanyahu [stated](#) that "if [the Palestinians] choose to recognize the State of Israel and abandon terrorism, they will find a unified people that is willing to make peace and is prepared for peace with concessions, but it must be real peace." This is not a new idea. Even before the founding of the state of Israel more than 60 years ago, the early Zionists sought peace with their Arab neighbors. Israel, with the strong support of the United States, has remained committed to that goal throughout its history, repeatedly demonstrating its desire to live side-by-side with neighboring states and peoples. Israel's willingness to trade parts of its historic homeland for peace has led to peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. Likewise, Israel has proven willing to make bold, painful concessions in order to end the conflict with the Palestinians.

Ever since the formation of the Israelite army in the desert, our nation has always sought to defend itself without having to use military might. Today, the state of Israel lives up to this powerful Jewish tradition, making peace the first priority. ■