

## Drash B'Midbar

Numbers 1:1 – 4:20

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Shabbat shalom.

This Shabbat we begin reading B'Midbar, which in Hebrew means "In the desert." The English name of course is The Book of Numbers. No kidding...the Book of Numbers...lots and lots and lots of numbers:

On the **first** day of the **second** month...

Take a census...every male...age of **twenty** years and up...

Tribe of Reuben: 46,500

Tribe of Simeon: 59,300

Tribe of Issachar: 54,400

All Israelites able to bear arms: 603,550

On and on...endless numbers...until the punch line: the number of first-born males, 22,273.

What are we to make of this? Why should we care that the Tribe of Issachar counts 54,400 rather than any other number?

In past years I found this parasha to be the perfect opportunity to check out the colorful historical maps at the back of Etz Hayim.

However, last year Karen gave this drash for B'Midbar and I thought: maybe I am missing something. Perhaps there is something deeper here that bears contemplating.

Let's focus on the punch-line: 22,273 first-born males. 22,273.

In my work I do science-y things. My colleagues would say that this number is specified to 5 significant digits, or equivalently, that it has a precision of about one part in ten thousand. But this number isn't counting Facebook likes, or reporting a measurement of the anomalous magnetic moment of the muon, or tabulating Steph Curry's 3-point percentage.

This number is counting people. And the difference between 22,273 and 22,272 is a person.

Now, we have no way of knowing whether the number 22,273 is precisely correct, reasonably accurate, or even in the right ballpark. But that's not what I want to focus on here. Rather, let's just focus on what we see on the page - that the number is specified as precisely as possible, to the person.

Biblical scholars generally attribute the composition of the Book of Numbers to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Somebody at that time first wrote this number down, and soferim have continued to record it faithfully - for over two millennia.

What was in the mind of this first sofer of the Book of Numbers? What did he (and it likely was a "he") want to communicate by recording such a specific number? I think the answer must be: "Every person this community counts. I cannot list everyone's name, but I can document that they are here and are important."

We indeed don't know the names of the vast majority of them, though fortunately we have the record of a few, like Eliasaph ben Doo-el and Shloomiel ben Tsoori-shadai. Don't those evocative names make you wonder what they were like as people? Who had a good sense of humor, who could shoot an arrow for distance, who was a devoted husband, who was a lazy

dead-beat? The first sofer found it vitally important to record – somehow - their existence, and that of everyone in the community.

The deep message to us, across the millennia, does not depend on whether 22,273 is accurate or way off from reality. Rather, simply by writing a number with such precision, the first sofer is telling us: Every life matters.

Now, that's not really correct as stated, because by design the census count in today's parasha is off by about a factor two. If there were 22,273 first-born males counted for the census, then there must also have been about 22,273 first-born females in the community who were not counted. But from our perspective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can see them there in the parasha, in the gaps between the letters. They were daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, caretakers, scolds, lousy cooks or brilliant ones. I would like to think that the first sofer also wanted to tell us about them, but couldn't quite find a way to do it.

By the miracle of our tradition, over the intervening millennia soferim and soferot have been faithfully copying this and all the other numbers in today's parasha, without modification. I speculate that at least one of them, at some point, wondered: "Does it matter if I change a few of these numbers around, just for variety? Who would notice, and who would care?" But then they copied the numbers faithfully anyway, because these numbers do matter, because they are counting people, and Every Life Matters.

Which brings us to the present day. Our society is in an intense struggle over whose voices get to be heard and counted, who gets treated with respect and can go in peace, whose lives matter. It fills the news and fully occupies our attention.

From the perspective of May 2021, the census reported in today's parasha was deeply flawed – it left out half of the community. The struggle to overcome that bias, and all the other imbalances in our society, is still going on.

But if we take today's parasha as the starting point, and recognize both that humanity has taken great strides since then and still has much to do, the ringing message from the parasha is indeed: every life matters.

I find this message to be deeply moving, and will now do my check of the color maps in the back of Etz Hayim during some other parasha.

Shabbat Shalom