

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

Bamidbar 2020 “Numbered by Name”

First, I'd like to acknowledge that this week's sermon is sponsored by Marjie Risman and Ed Letzter, in commemoration of the Shloshim of Marjie's brother Harris Risman (Chaim Uriah ben Yaacov) z'l, which will be on 28 Iyar/May 22. May his memory be a blessing.

I'd also like to congratulate Miriam and David Morley, and their son Noah, upon the birth of a baby boy this week. The bris will be held via Zoom this coming Wednesday, with details TBA. Mazal tov!

As this period of relative isolation has continued, many people have commented to me that on some days, the time seems to drag on slowly, but at other times, the weeks seem to pass quickly. This week begins Parshat and Sefer Bamidbar, which is required for us to begin before Shavuot and upon reflecting on this, I find it hard to believe that these 7 weeks are behind us, and we're already about to celebrate Shavuot. One question that comes to mind this Shabbat is, **Why** are we mandated to start Bamidbar before Shavuot. Why is that so important?

As we point out every year, the title Bamidbar means *desert*, but the Christians refer to it as the Book of Numbers, apparently based on their interpretation of the name used by the sages – Sefer Hapikudim, the Book of Counting.

We've also observed that remarkably, the root word, of Pekudim, *pakad, count*, has the same triple meaning in Hebrew as it does in English. It can mean *to enumerate*, as in counting numbers; *to be significant*, as in being someone who counts; and it can refer to someone of high status, with *the title of Count*. In explaining the verse which tells us that the census should be carried out *bimispar shemot*, by *using the number of names*, Seforno teaches that it's a reminder that every single person must matter, because God forbid a person should simply be reduced to a number without a name.

This message echoes the beginning of the Book of Shemot, which tells us some of the names of Yaakov's family who traveled to Egypt from Israel. Rashi's first commentary in the book of Shemot explains the significance of these names and gives the same explanation as the Seforno in our parsha – that we were called by name because we are significant and not just numbers. He quotes Yishayahu Hanavi, who compared the Jewish people to the multitude of stars: even with their vast numbers, each star has a name, indicating their significance to God. Similarly, each Jew has a unique name because they too are each special to God.

It is no coincidence that we also find this lesson in Sefer Vayikra, which begins with the word *Vayikra* in order to signify that God has called Moses, the prophet of the Jewish people, with words of Chiba, warmth and love, in stark contrast to the prophet Bilaam. This name of endearment means that God has a special love for us, which he expresses by going out of his way for us, beyond what he will do for other nations.

We see, therefore, that at the beginning of every book of the Torah in which God addresses the Jewish people, He expresses that we are beloved. Why does God make a point of this? Perhaps the reason is that as we proceed through each book, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the terrible things that happen to us. In Shemot, we are brought to Egypt, only to end up enslaved. In Vayikra, the Kohanim are appointed to do special service in the mishkan but the inaugural ceremony is marred by the horrible death of Aaron's sons. And in Bamidbar, along with the verse which declares that the Jewish people are to be counted, we are reminded that the very people who are counted in the census are the ones who die in the desert. Moreover, that painful narrative is followed by other difficult episodes such as the sin of the spies, Korach and Pinchas where many Jews died.

However, God prefaces these negative events with his expressions of love, so that we will realize that the bad things which happen are always in the wider context of God's love for us. Without that truth, we would be lost. In keeping with this theme, the holiday of Shavuot is a time when God showed great love for us, and we returned His love by declaring, *Naaseh Vinishma, We will do and we will listen*, but all too soon, we sinned with the golden calf. Nonetheless, just as He did at the outset of Shemot, Vayikra, and Bamidbar, on Shavuot, God expressed love for us that would endure through all the painful events which followed.

And that is the message of Bamidbar, a message which is expressed so well in the story in Mesechet Pesachim 68b about Rabbi Yosef, who celebrated Shavuot more than any other holiday, because, as he said, *Ei lo hai yoma deka garim, kama Yosef ika bishuka, If not for Shavuot, [the day we received the Torah], [I wouldn't be Rebi Yosef], I'd be just another Joe in the marketplace*. That is the lesson we should carry into Shavuot, especially during this time of loss and hardship. Even when we feel despair, we must remember that because of Shavuot, we are not just a number, because we count, we matter to God, and we each one of us is numbered by name. Shabbat shalom.