

Parashat Bamidbar 5780, 2020:

What's in a Name?

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Chazal's name for the fourth book of the Torah is “*Sefer HaPekudim* — the Book of the Counting;” little wonder, then, that it has been given the English title, “Numbers.” The accuracy of this name becomes clear upon reading the first 46 *pasukim* of our *parasha* that focus on a detailed numerical census of our nascent nation. Throughout this presentation, the phrase, “*misspar shemot* — according to the number of their names,” is repeated no less than six times. This fact alone gives us pause to ponder, since there is a general exegetical principle that words and phrases are repeated in the Torah in order to emphasize their importance. In each of these instances, however, this expression does not seem to add to the verses’ essential meaning; as such, its inclusion in these *pasukim* conceals more than it reveals.

We are fortunate that the Ramban (1194-1270) tackles the singular import of *misspar shemot* in his *Commentary on the Torah*. Therein, he cites a beautiful midrash found in *Bamidbar Rabbah* that we no longer have in our editions:

The Holy One blessed be He said to Moshe to count the Jewish people with dignity and [with a focus on] the recognition of their inherent greatness, each person on an individual basis. Moreover, he was prohibited from saying to the head of the family, “How many are there in your family, how many sons do you have?” Instead, [said the Almighty:]

“Everyone will pass before you in awe and respect and you will count them...” (Gloss on 45:1, all translations my own)

What exactly transpired as a result of Moshe counting everyone among the Jewish people by name? Once again, the Ramban addresses this question and adds that Aharon was an equal partner in this process:

When an individual would come before the Father of all Prophets [Moshe] and his brother, the Holy One to Hashem [Aharon], and he would become known to them by name, he would acquire great *zechut* — merit and [long] life, for he had entered into the *sod* — the ultimate sanctum of the Jewish people — and onto the [spiritual] roster of *b'nai Yisrael*. [Therefore,] he would henceforth enjoy the merits of the entire people as he was now counted amongst them.

The Ramban continues to explain how each Jew who passed before Moshe and Aharon acquired such *zechut*: “...for when they looked upon them for solely positive purposes, they would request mercy for them and ask that Hashem, the G-d of their fathers, should add to their descendants a thousand-fold and never diminish their numbers...” In my view, Moshe and Aharon’s *tefilah* was not only quantitative in nature, but qualitative as well. In other words, they prayed for both the continued numerical and spiritual growth of the Jewish people — a *tefilah* whose fulfillment we continue to pray each day.

My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, analyzes the Ramban’s interpretation of the rationale inherent in the census of our forebears, and presents the following depth-level understanding as to why it had to be performed *b’ misspar shemot*:

G-d’s intent was a dual one. It was not enough for Moshe to know the total number of the Jewish people. He had to perform a head count in order to get to know each person as an individual with their own background and life experience. Moshe’s additional obligation emanates from the fact that he was *rabban shel Yisrael*, the *rebbe* of the entire Jewish nation, and therefore had to know every Jew by name. It was as though G-d were telling him: “Moshe, when you pray, you will pray not for the general public, but also for every Jew in his or her moments of joy and pain.” This duality, specifically the focus on the

individual, was the Ramban's true intent. (*Darosh Darash Yosef*: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah, Rabbi Avishai C. David editor, page 284, underlining my own)

For the Rav, who throughout his many works and public lectures, continually focused on the existential trials and tribulations of the individual, *misspar shemot* in the thought of the Ramban emerges as a constitutive element of the entire census enterprise. Significantly, each and every Jew had a name representative of their identity, value and unique importance before Hashem.

May the Almighty Who knows the names of all mankind, remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael*, and the entire world, soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.