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בס"ד

Parashat Bemidbar Part II Concerning the Numbers

1. Literal or Nonliteral?

There are many remarkable features of the census numbers in our *parasha* and of those in the census of Numbers 26.* We are not referring at this point to the amazingly large numbers in and of themselves but to specific details of the numbers.

In both these censuses, one taken in the second year from the Exodus and the other in the fortieth year, individual totals for each of the twelve tribes conclude with zero. That is generally thought to be the result of “rounding out,” the census not being concerned with counting single individuals. However, the penultimate numeral for eleven of the twelve tribes in each census is also zero while for one tribe in each census it is not zero: in the second year Gad’s total ends with fifty, and in the fortieth year Reuben’s total ends with thirty. These details render the explanation of “rounding out” at least incomplete.

	<u>Year 2</u>	<u>Year 40</u>
Reuben	46,500	43,730
Simeon	59,300	22,200
Gad	45,650	40,500
Judah	74,600	76,500
Issachar	54,400	64,300
Zebulun	57,400	60,500
Ephraim	40,500	32,500
Manasseh	32,200	52,700
Benjamin	35,400	45,600
Dan	62,700	64,400
Asher	41,500	53,400
Naphtali	53,400	45,400
Totals	603,550	601,730

In the individual counts of all twelve tribes in both censuses, as well as in their totals, the number eight is not attested a single time, a most unusual phenomenon if we are dealing with actual population statistics.

In the Levite counts, the number eight does appear. Significantly, it is associated with the branch most closely identified with the covenant, that of Kohath, the branch from which Moses and Aaron stem and which was responsible to carry the Ark of the Covenant during Israel’s travels. This is consistent with the numerous instances of covenant and sanctuary symbolism associated with the number eight and its decimal multiples, as we have often pointed out.** The individual counts of Gershon and Merari do not include an eight but it is attested in the grand total of the thirty- to fifty-year-old Levites, a number that of course includes Kohath.

Levites	<u>from one month</u>	<u>30–50</u>
Gershon	7,500	2,630
Kohath	8,600	2,750
Merari	6,200	3,200
Totals	22,300	8,580

An astonishing phenomenon associated with the hundreds column was pointed out by Marc Shamula. In the individual totals of the twelve tribes in both the second-year and fortieth-year censuses, as well as in the totals of the three branches of Levites (both for those one month and older and for those thirty to fifty years of age), the hundreds column does not contain a single attestation of four numbers: 0, 1, 8 and 9. As these are the first two and last two digits of the base-ten number system, and as they form a chiasm (A-B-

B'-A'), the unattested digits appear to be intentionally omitted to transmit a message.

The number of Levites one month and over in the second-year count is 22,000 (Num. 3:39). It does not appear that this total could have resulted from “rounding out” since the precise number was required; these Levites were being designated to the sanctuary in exchange for the Israelite firstborn, redeeming them, one Levite for one firstborn, and there were more firstborn than Levites. The Israelite firstborn count was 22,273 – 273 more than the Levite number, thus necessitating a five-shekel payment by each excess Israelite firstborn, those for whom a Levite was not available to be exchanged. Redemption silver for each was provided, a total of 1,365 *sheqalim* (273 x 5).

Although the Torah gives the Levite total as 22,000, the sum of the subtotals of their three branches equals 22,300. The Talmud (*b. 'Arakh. 5a*) addresses this problem. It explains that 300 Levites were themselves firstborn and were already dedicated to G-d like all the firstborn; hence, they were unable to be used for redemption of Israelite firstborn, since, in effect, they had to redeem themselves. Their new status was of a different order than previously. It should be noted that there is no hint of this explanation in the Torah. And 300 firstborn males out of 22,300 male Levites is a ratio of one firstborn for every seventy-four males, which might point toward a different explanation. However, a similar problem exists with the ratio of the non-Levite firstborn to the total of Israelites, which we will discuss shortly.

Each one-month-and-over count of the three branches of Levites also concludes with two zeros. In the count of those thirty to fifty years of age, however, one total ends with thirty and one ends with fifty. (Given that these are the same two numbers that were the exceptions in the tens column of the Israelite counts it seems likely that the explanation is somehow connected with the symbolism of these numbers: 30 and 50, or 80.) The count of the Levites in the fortieth-year census is 23,000.

Dr. Nessim Roumi pointed out another compelling indication that the census numbers contain symbolic associations and were not intended to be understood

as actual population figures. The distribution of all the numerals attested in the individual totals of the twelve tribes in the Numbers 1 census, excluding the zero, manifest a chiasmic pattern (A-B-C-D-D'-C'-B'-A'), as follows:

<u>numeral</u>	<u>times attested</u>
1	1
2	3
3	4
4	10
5	10
6	4
7	3
9	1

Of course this pattern was coordinated with the fact that the number eight does not appear a single time in this table.

The numerals of the Reuben-Simeon-Gad *degel* (again excluding attestations of zero) also manifest such a chiasm:

<u>numeral</u>	<u>times attested</u>
3	1
4	2
5	4
6	2
9	1

It should be noted that in this three-tribe unit, four numbers do not appear (1, 2, 7 and 8).

Another difficulty with a literal reading of the Torah's figures is that the number of firstborn males one-month-old and older in the twelve tribes is given as 22,273 (Num. 3:43). In a population in which 603,550 men were twenty years of age and older, to whom must be added their presumably hundreds of thousands of sons who were below twenty years of age, how is one to understand that there are so few firstborn males and so many later-born males? The ratio of firstborn males to the men twenty years of age and older is one to twenty-seven. But to fully appreciate this ratio we should take into account the total male population, including those under twenty years of age. (For a rough approximation we will follow Ibn Ezra, who assumes that the under-twenty

population is generally equal to that of over-twenty.) The ratio would then be one firstborn male for each fifty-four males in the nation. This surely is extremely problematic.

It is far-fetched to assume that there were vastly more firstborn females than males, or that there was an extraordinarily high number of male firstborn deaths, matters never remarked upon in the Torah. These numbers taken literally would mean that a small percent of women had numerous children each and the great majority of women were barren, or most of the women in the nation (and the corresponding number of men) were not married, totally unacceptable assumptions.

To assume that the number of firstborn males refers only to those who were below twenty years of age (as proposed by the Hertz Commentary on the Bible [Num. 3:43]) runs counter to the text, which unambiguously speaks of an inclusive count. In any event, such an assumption would only lessen the problem.

When asked about the above, Rabbi S. D. Sassoon stated that the numbers of the census, as many other numbers in the Torah, should be understood as symbolic. His view was that the Torah's message often used symbolism and allegory, as was known to be the case in certain educated circles of the ancient Near East. Use of allegory "released" the Torah from the weighty limitations of literalness and allowed for an infinitely more nuanced and sophisticated expression, greatly enhancing its prophetically inspired message to the diligently attentive. The numerous, coordinated details right on the surface in the text, discernible without manipulation (some of which we touch on in our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*), point to a comprehensive system and call for an ever-deeper study of Scripture.***

Consistent with his understanding of number symbolism in the Torah, Rabbi Sassoon considered it significant that the total of the twelve tribes plus the Levites (never explicitly stated in the text) is 612,130 (603,550 + 8,580). While rejecting nearly all cases of *gematriot* (interpreting a word based on the numerical

value of its letters) that have been proffered through the centuries as arbitrary and subjective, his research demonstrated that such number symbolism was a genuine element in some scriptural writings. Here, he considered 612 to be intended as the *gematria* of קְרִית (covenant), while 130 is the decimal multiple (10 x 13) of the *gematria* of אֶחָד (one). This depicts an ideal state of the nation united in its covenant with the one G-d (see *Natan Hochmah Lishlomo*, Heb. p. 55).

Scholars have pointed out connections between our census numbers and ancient Near Eastern calendars and astronomical phenomena. Perhaps the most prominent example is the 35,400 count of Benjamin, a decimal multiple of the number of days in a "lunar year." Addressing such apparent linkage, J. Milgrom states (JPS Commentary on Numbers, p. 338) that this "suggests the possibility that the tribal figures were made to correspond to celestial movements and thus present Israel as the (literally) 'armies of the Lord' (Exod. 12:41; cf. Exod. 7:4), corresponding to the astral bodies, the Lord's celestial armies (Gen. 2:1; Deut. 17:30)."

2. Conjectures

Given that the two exceptions to the zeros in the tens column of the two censuses of Israelites – Gad's fifty and Reuben's thirty – constitute an eighty, one may wonder if this should be understood as joining these two tribes together in some sort of covenantal association. This might point toward an improved understanding of their situations. Perhaps, in a variation of the traditional interpretative principle that has been applied to prophetic compositions מַעֲשֵׂי אֲבוֹת מִיָּמֵן לְבָנִים ("Happenings of the fathers are signs for the children"), we may view the almost forty years from census to census as representing the passage of a certain period of time and focused on future occurrences. The reader would thus be conveyed to some later point in Israel's national history.

Reuben and Gad were the only two tribes whose land portions were completely in Transjordanian territory, outside the land of Israel proper. Joshua confirmed (Josh. 22:1-3) that they faithfully fulfilled their covenantal commitments made to Moses: "What Hashem has spoken concerning your servants we shall fulfill" (Num. 32:31). At one point after these tribes

assumed their territories they were seriously, albeit wrongly, suspected of abandoning the covenant (Josh. 22:11 ff.). (Half the tribe of Manasseh also took a holding in Transjordan, but perhaps they were not included in this symbolism because they were connected to the land of Israel proper through the other portion of the tribe.)

The Kohath and Gershon counts, which also ended with fifty and thirty respectively, perhaps should also be taken as a unit of eighty and thus signify some connection to the covenant.

Five of the twelve tribes declined in number from the second-year census to that of the fortieth-year. From the striking particulars associated with these declines it appears clear that the Torah intended these numbers to be seen as possessing a symbolic dimension. The only *degel* (three-tribe unit) that declined in numbers from census to census was that of Reuben-Simeon-Gad, each tribe of which was diminished. Reuben's and Gad's decline may very well be related to the fact that their territory was totally in Transjordan. This was depicted from the beginning as a negative (Num. 32), a case of sacrificing spiritual values for materialistic attraction. In Transjordan they were more vulnerable to attack by enemies than in Israel proper (see Jer. 49:1). Moses' prayer for Reuben in *parashat Vezot Haberaakha* is that the tribe not die out (Deut. 33:6). As narrated later in Scripture, these tribes were exiled before the bulk of the northern kingdom (1 Chr. 5:26), by Tiglath-pileser of Assyria (745–727 B.C.E.).

The greatest decline (more than 60 percent) was in Simeon, probably related to the plague associated with the *Baal Pe'or* episode in which a chieftain of that tribe and his cooperating brethren were prominent in the transgression (Num. 25). In any event, Simeon is the only tribe not mentioned by Moses in *Vezot Haberaakha* (Deut. 33). Moses' blessing was apparently directed to the tribes as he envisioned them in the future, by which time it seems Simeon will have lost its standing as an independent entity. It appears that Simeon was taken over by Judah, in whose proximity its territory was located (see our *Vezot Haberaakha* study). When the northern tribes split from Rehoboam, only Benjamin is mentioned as remaining attached to Judah (1 Kings 12:21-23), Simeon

apparently having already been absorbed by its more powerful neighbor.

The other two tribes that declined in numbers in the fortieth-year census were Ephraim and Naphtali, each of which suffered a reduction of – significantly – exactly 8,000. The decline of 8,000 in Ephraim's population, probably associated with the covenant, may be related to the role that tribe played in being the leader of the northern kingdom, which strayed from the covenant. It was Jeroboam son of Nebat of Ephraim who split the kingdom, became king of the northern kingdom and established the two golden calves, countermanding the covenant (1 Kings 12). Naphtali was also exiled before the rest of the northern kingdom, also by Tiglath-pileser, (2 Kings 15:29), perhaps, scholars believe, shortly before 732 B.C.E.

(Another number with significant symbolism in the Torah is seven [see our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*]. In the ancient Near East, seven was representative of completion and perfection. This was the case from long before the Torah was on the scene. In the Torah, the number seven often appears to represent the “old order,” those circles or individuals committed to the system that was in place prior to establishment of the G-d-Israel covenant, which was signified by the number eight. The number twelve was also prominent in the ancient Near East and plays an important role in the Torah. However, in the Torah the number thirteen, the *gematria* of $\aleph \aleph \aleph$, “one,” appears to be associated with “one G-d” and in an important respect replaces the twelve, such as in the transformation of Israel from being a nation of twelve tribes to one of thirteen tribes.)

At this time we do not have a compelling explanation as to why the Torah put forth the number of Levites as 22,000 when the actual count was 22,300, or for what the 273 Israelite firstborn that could not be directly redeemed by the Levites represent. But in the context of the other obviously symbolic numbers, these also do not appear to reflect actual counts. It should be noted that 22,000 is a multiple of eight and not of seven, while 22,300 is not a multiple of eight. The fortieth-year count of Levites, 23,000, is also a multiple of eight and not of seven. Furthermore, the

number of the non-Levites being replaced, 273, is a multiple of seven but not of eight. Thus, these numbers might reflect an important aspect of the replacement of the firstborn by the Levites. This may allude to a fuller commitment to the covenant on the part of the Levites and a lack thereof on the part of the firstborn. As 273 is also a multiple of 13, it may indicate a commitment to the monotheistic principle but not to the new covenant.

The prophecy of the Torah addresses multiple audiences and needs and clearly did not state its entire message explicitly. Rabbi Sassoon demonstrated many facets of insight into the Torah's message that are enhanced by the symbolism of key numbers. A great deal of research still needs to be done to recover the original intention of the Torah regarding symbolism of the numbers and the fullness of its message.

Endnotes

* In our *Parashat Pequdei Part I* study we address the matter of the identical total of Israelites – 603,550 – that resulted from both the count of half-*sheqalim* (see Exod. 38:26) and the census of the first chapter of Numbers. This presents a problem. The half-*sheqalim* were remitted before Tabernacle construction and used for that purpose. The Tabernacle was officially finalized and assembled on the first day of the first month of the second year. The census of our *parasha* was taken during the second month of the second year. The solution we proposed, in short, is that changes in large populations occur daily and a census is only an “accurate” approximation covering a range of time. Thus, the elaborate census described in our *parasha* was taken to be the official count for that

period of time. When *Parashat Pequdei* was written the official count was used.

** See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*.

*** Of course Rabbi Sassoon recognized that an allegoric interpretation of the census numbers eliminates what otherwise are pressing problems for which satisfactory traditional solutions have not been proposed. These include the enormous logistics enigma of an entourage of over two million individuals (when women and children are included) traveling through the wilderness for forty years without leaving an archaeological trace. And the total absence of relevant, recorded data in the annals of Egypt and neighboring nations who would have known of the wondrous phenomenon is problematic. A similar problem concerns the entry into Canaan of such a large assemblage. It should be noted that the total population of Egypt in the 13th century B.C.E. is estimated by historians as not much more than four million, if even that much. It should also be noted that both scriptural attestations and extrabiblical evidence point to vastly smaller numbers of Israelites in the land of Israel at the time of (and immediately after) their settlement there under Joshua. Rabbi Sassoon never presented his views from the perspective of solving these problems; his arguments derived from the numerous and weighty indications within the Torah itself. He often commented on how relevant research is like detective work, since so much of the original meaning of the Torah has been lost over the passage of millennia, and on the amount of research that must still be done in order to gain clarity in many Torah passages.

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