

NATURALLY DIVINE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

This week's Parsha, Naso, continues the census taking of the Bnai Yisroel prior to their anticipated entry into Eretz Yisroel. In the last issue of the Rabbi's Notebook, Parsha Bamidbar, I posed a series of questions regarding the census taking. I would like to continue that discussion with this week's issue.

The following are the questions that were posed in the last issue.

"Why just men? What happened to the women? Why just between twenty and sixty? Wars have always been fought by the youth. Is there a qualitative difference between a twenty year old and a nineteen year old? How about the above sixty lobby? Given a world where centurions were seemingly commonplace, sixty was barely middle age! How about the benefits of their seasoned years and experience? Why eliminate such a valuable resource in advancing the destiny of the nation and the world?

Further more, what about the whole Ayin Harah thing regarding not counting people? In Shemos Hashem commanded Moshe to use the half-shekel to count the Jews. A year later Moshe is doing a direct head-count. Why the difference in methods of census taking between the time they first left Egypt and this week's Parsha? Finally, why separate the tribe of Layvie from the national census, and why were they counted from the tender age of 30 days ?

The questions regarding why not women and why not those older than 60 or younger than 20 were addressed in the last issue. Succinctly put, the 20 to 60 range of age represented the three generational unit of family ? gra parents, and children. The three-generational family is the basic unit of humanity that G-d intended to accomplish His purpose for creating the universe. G-d's purpose was to manifest His greatness through His constant caring, His constant Chesed. It is the family unit that is best suited for emulating and thereby teaching the greatness of G-d and the wonder of His ever-present Chesed. It is in the setting of Family that constant Chesed (giving and selflessness) is practiced, taught, and infused into the fiber of each individual and the nation as a whole. Then, by example, the other nations can emulate the Jewish family and better realize and understand G- d's greatness. The census was not intended to ignore women or the above 60 and bellow 20 year olds. The census was intended to count real and potential family units. G-d chose the above 20 and below 60 year old male as the representative of the three-generational Jewish family.

Counting families also de-emphasized the importance of the individual. The Mishnah In Avos states,

"It is not for you to complete the work and at the same time you are not exempt from doing your part." The destiny of Am Yisroel is to reveal G-d's greatness to all of humanity and facilitate the final redemption. No one person is intended to accomplish that end. It is the destiny of a nation and the obligation of each individual. It will be the combined effort of every person that will accomplish G-d's intention.

Fundamental to accomplishing final redemption is realizing the totality of individual and collective dependency on G-d. To the extent that a person or a nation realizes their dependency on G-d is the extent to which they attain humility and will devote themselves to the mission of emulating and teaching His greatness. It is the three-generational family setting that first teaches the human individual the reality of dependency. It is the three-generational family that first teaches humility. It is the three-generational family that first directs our maturing understanding toward G-d and the totality of our dependency on Him.

The opposite of dependency and humility, what I term the Bar Kochva syndrome ("My strength (not G-d's) and the might of my hands (not G-d's) fashioned this great host") guarantees individual and national failure. The Bar Kochva syndrome is alive and well in all generations and remains among our greatest challenges.

It is the setting of war that best challenges the illusion of "My strength and the might of my hands fashioned this great host." Individual heroism and collective victory mask the reality of miraculous intervention and Divinely directed individual protection that is the sum total of any and all war. Warriors train to be the best they can possibly be. They train for strength, endurance, speed, and discipline. They train to work together, follow commands, and when necessary, take individual initiative and responsibility. The outcome prior to actual conflict is a superman complex that was captured in the legendary figure of Bar Kochva.

Descendent of King David, this heroic warrior expressed his trust in G-d and the destiny of His chosen people by awakening the hearts of his generation to the possibilities of the final redemption. Proclaimed as the Messiah by the great Rabbi Akiva, Bar Kochva inspired personal greatness in his men and captured the hearts of the nation with his feats of strength and seemingly invincible victories against the Roman legions.

However, the dream became an illusion when Bar Kochva denied the totality of his dependency on G-d. "G-d, we do not ask You to help us. We only ask of You that You do not help the enemy!" The meteoric rise of Bar Kochva's star illuminated the darkness of the post 2nd Bais Hamikdash era for but a moment before crashing into the field of dreams that would have been the 3rd Bais Hamikdash. Bar Kochva dreamt of being King and Messiah and in the end realized that he was only a limited and dependent human. How ironic! Had he only accepted that he was nothing more than a limited and dependent human he might very well have merited to become King and Messiah!

Head counts are forbidden; instead, the custom is to count items that represent heads. Whether half

shekels, tie clips, or words in a ten-word verse, we do not simply count individuals. Why?

Among the reasons offered for the census in Sefer Bamidbar (book of Numbers) was to know the number of able-bodied warriors. The Bnai Yisroel were about to enter Israel and claim it from the seven Canaanite nations. It seems reasonable that Moshe should know how many soldiers were available to be drafted into the army. However, the first battles waged and won against Egypt, Amalek, and eventually Jericho, make that reasoning somewhat questionable. At the Parting of the Sea the Bnai Yisroel were instructed to stand silently as G-d waged the war against Egypt. Against Amalek the Jews were enjoined to focus on Moshe's uplifted arms and focus their efforts on G-d's miraculous intervention. At the battle for Jericho the Jews would not need to lift a finger. A seven-day seven times scenic stroll around the city walls accompanied by a priestly Shofar concerto and the walls came tumbling down. What difference did it make how many able-bodied warriors there were?

As mortals, we must balance the natural with the Divine. Naturally speaking, it is important for a commander in chief to know the extent of his deployable forces. Divinely speaking, one or 1000, 1000 or 1,000,000 are of no consequence. David led thousands into victorious battle against the Plishtim while Shimshon (Samson - this week's Haftorah) defeated them single-handedly. We count soldiers because a general must know the strength of his army. We do not count heads because it doesn't really matter.

The verse commonly used to count "a minyan" (quorum for prayer) is, "Save Your people and bless Your heritage, tend them and elevate them forever." (Tehilim 28:9) For the purpose of counting a Minyan, this verse works well because it has ten words (in the original Hebrew); however, I believe that there is a much more profound reason for having chosen that specific verse. When counting individuals for any collective project, devotional or military, Chazal (the Rabbis) wanted us to strike a balance between the natural and the Divine. >From a natural point of view we need to know how many individuals there are before saying Kaddish, Kedusha, or Burachu.

From the Divine point of view, Chazal wanted us to always remember that the individual is only as significant as his level of subjugation to G-d and the nation.

The verse chosen for "counting" directs our attention to both subjugation to G-d and subjugation to the nation. "Save Your people." The people are Yours and it is only You Who can save them. "Bless Your heritage." The heritage is Yours and only You can bless them. "Tend them and elevate them forever." The nation can only exist and grow now and forever if You tend them and elevate them. In the entire verse there is no mention of the individual. The verse presents our existence as solely dependent on G-d and subsumed within the context of the nation.

Counting must be for a reason. The reason must be related to serving G-d. The census in the beginning of Bamidbar was a showing of G-d's love for the Bnai Yisroel. (Rashi 1:1) "G-d counted the Jewish people at specific intervals because of His love for them. ?In this week's Parsha, as G-d His

presence upon the nation, a month after the dedication of the Mishkan, He counted them again." The counting had been commanded by G-d. The counting directed the Bnai Yisroel to consider each individual and each family unit as essential and important to G-d. Therefore, the counting did not require the two part process of counting an item and that represented the individual. So long as G-d directed the counting the counting acted to subjugate and humble the individual rather than elevate and strengthen the ego.

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