

# NOT JUST NUMBERS

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

This week's parsha marks the beginning of our reading of the fourth book of the Torah. The book concerns itself with the travels and travails of the Jewish people during their sojourn in the desert of Sinai. The book is replete with names of the leaders of the tribes of Israel, the count of the number of people in the camp of Israel and of many events that shaped the future of Israel for many generations to come. All of the commentators to Torah are perplexed by the great detail recorded in the book of Bamidbar. Of what value is it to know the names of the leaders of the tribes of Israel? And what do the numbers of the count of the individual tribes and families of the Jewish people teach us? In a Torah where every word and nuance is important, why all of the long detail and the names and numbers that are seemingly unimportant facts? There are many and varied explanations to this challenging problem, but I wish to dwell on one idea that I hope will give us more meaning and understanding in the parsha and the book of Bamidbar itself as well.

The Torah is determined to emphasize to us the importance of each and every person in this world. Merely stating that there were approximately six hundred thousand male Jews from the ages of twenty to sixty only gives us a statistic. Most statistics are faceless, impersonal and sometimes even meaningless. They never carry a moral or even educational lesson to the reader. They are cold numbers. The Torah therefore personalizes the numbers in this week's parsha and in the book of Bamidbar generally. It does give us the names of the leaders of the tribes and their fathers and families and traces for us their lineage. It tells us that some of them had large families and others much smaller ones. It points out the difference in numbers and in leadership of each of the tribes so that we should not view the Jewish society then - and certainly now - as being monolithic. Through the numbers that are now flesh and blood people, the stage is set for understanding some of the later events that occurred in the desert - the rebellion of Korach and the behavior of Pinchas and Zimri for example. The challenges of Moshe in leading the people of Israel in the desert of Sinai are more understandable to us when we see the wide variety and great numbers of people who he had to deal with day in and day out for forty years. Once the numbers are personalized and broken down the story becomes much clearer and more relevant to every age.

It is one thing to say that the Holocaust destroyed six million Jews. But that statement of fact remains impersonal and cold, unfeeling and without emotion. However, reading or listening to the story of just one Holocaust survivor brings the whole awful tragedy into immediacy and some understanding. Lifting the count of the Jewish people from mere statistics to a position of human empathy and understanding is part of the goal of this week's parsha and the entire book of

Bamidbar.

Shabat shalom.

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