

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EACH TRIBE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The parsha of this week, and certain portions of this particular Chumash as a whole, deals with the counting of the people of Israel. The traditional Jewish commentators always saw the repeated counting of the Jewish people, that we see in the desert as recorded in the Torah and later in the Land of Israel as well, as a sign of love. People always count and check up on their important assets, whether familial, social or financial.

Everyone checks on their financial portfolios and so to speak counts their money. This is such an inborn natural trait that the halacha, when it wishes to describe the necessary attention and care due to the recitation of the words of our prayer services, compares this level of care "as though one was counting one's money coins."

Naturally, counting people is far different than counting money or other inanimate objects. Every human being is different than anyone else. Our fingerprints and DNA are unique to ourselves as are our opinions, thoughts, character traits and behavior patterns. It is therefore imperative that the Lord alone order and supervise the count of the Jewish people. A purely human count will not truly reveal the diversity and human qualities embedded in the cold numbers that jump from the printed page of the Chumash.

Perhaps this is the message that Jewish tradition tells us when it warns us humans not to count people coldly and statistically purely by number lest a plague of troubles follow such a count. Counting people as identical creatures and thinking of them in that fashion always brings about troubles and tragedies both in personal lives and in national Jewish life as well.

Much is made of the disparity in numbers between the individual tribes of Israel. Some of the tribes have a very large population while others are relatively small in number. While the simple surface explanations to this phenomenon have to do with demographic patterns within families and groups, the rabbis always searched for deeper spiritual and supernatural reasons for these disparities.

Much of this can be traced to the relative hardships that each of the individual tribes suffered during the centuries of Egyptian slavery and persecution. The tribe of Levi was pretty much exempted from the true horrors of Egyptian persecution - therefore, the blessing of the Torah that "the greater the persecution, the more those Jews became more numerous."

The tribe of Shimon still suffered from criticism of their behavior and their undue aggressiveness by their father regarding the incidents of Shechem and Yosef. Therefore their numbers were always

small and the tribe itself as an independent entity practically ceased to exist after the Jewish people established themselves in the Land of Israel.

The blessings of Yaakov to Yosef and the favored position of Yosef and his rise to power vis a vis his brothers enabled the combined numbers of the tribes of Menashe and Efrayim to far surpass those of any of the other tribes of Israel. Apparently many lessons and much guidance is tucked away within the seemingly dry numbers that are recorded in this week's parsha.

Shabat shalom,
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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com