

PARSHAS BAMIDBAR - E PLURIBUS PLURIBUS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

E Pluribus Pluribus¹

Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Yisrael according to their families, according to their fathers' household, by number of the names, every male according to their families' head count.

This does seem to be a long-winded way of saying, "Count the Jews." The useful information that this census supplied was the strength of the "entire assembly," or how many people could be called upon to further the spiritual work of the Jewish people. Why does the pasuk - and so many repetitions of it - take so long to get there?

The Torah here comments on the birth of nations in general, and the Jewish nation in particular. Our pasuk describes the process whereby a collection of people becomes a nation.

Some people might see much ado about nothing in this. If people decide to call themselves a nation for any reason at all, who is going to stop them? Yet calling yourself a nation does not a nation make. People can deceive themselves into thinking that they have become some important entity, when they are nothing more than a collection of unrelated souls hiding behind a noun. Others might see coming together in response to a particular language, or anthem, or flag as evidence of nationhood. Yet if the ties that bind be so superficial and unimportant as that, any pretense to nationhood can unravel quickly.

The Jewish nation is called Bnei Yisrael - literally, the children of Yaakov Avinu. They were Bnei Yisrael when they were no more than twelve brothers, and they remain Bnei Yisrael when their ranks swell into the millions. Ultimately, they are a nation because they subscribe to a single mission statement, the ideals for which Yaakov lived and labored. The Torah nation cannot be simply a portion of mankind that happened to find themselves sharing a past history. Something real and substantial must hold them together.

Becoming part of that entity, though, is not simply a matter of identification with a set of goals. The Torah nation comes into being as a result of two simpler forms of aggregation. People must first become "families," and those families become "fathers' households." (This last phrase certainly denotes what we call "tribes.") The tribes come together as a nation. The point of our pasuk is that even after they associate on the national level, the simpler forms of connection remain not only valid, but crucial.

These levels of identification underscore the richness and diversity within Klal Yisrael. People are not all made of the same cloth. Diversity brings many advantages and blessings, but we can ignore all of them and still find purpose in the Torah's showcasing it in our pasuk, in the first census. In shaping the contours of a Jewish nation, the Torah broadcasts to the world what kind of people can be touched by its message. If diversity would not be Jewish feature, Torah could be written off by many. They would not have to reject it, but merely see it as relevant only to a given sub-community, or a special background, or a particular interest group. Torah, they would be able to argue, only suits those who possess those particular traits and characteristics. The Torah banishes such thoughts by including under its banner all sorts of differences - the outgrowths of so many different tribes and families. By stressing that the Jewish nation is built from many very different components, the Torah announces itself as relevant to all.

In fact, the Torah takes this principle further. People were counted through each person handing over his half-shekel, and proclaiming his name along with his family and tribal affiliations. Each individual, therefore, had to assert his value as an individual. The nation would be built by making use of the unique talents and capabilities of each person. Every man would have a contribution to make, and no two contributions would ever be identical.

It was to be a nation that celebrated difference, rather than repressed it.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bamidbar 1:2
