

# From Being Counted to Accounting for Our Own Actions

Parashat Bamidbar

R. Yonatan Cohen

The Book of Numbers begins with a census and concludes with a census. For this very reason, Bamidbar's rabbinic names, *Sefer Hapekudim* or *Sifrey*, literally mean "the Book of Counting" or "Census," commonly known to us as the Book of Numbers.

In his first comment on the book, Rashi notes, "Because they were dear to Him, He counted them often" (Rashi on Numbers 1:1). Like a loving parent, God counts the Children of Israel at regular intervals, ensuring at each moment the wellbeing of each one. Though this is certainly a truly loving relationship, God as parent or caregiver leaves little room for freedom, independence, and responsibility. God provides for each and every one of Israel's needs, at the risk, perhaps, that the people might not even realize what their heart truly desires. R. Benjamin Lau, a contemporary Israeli rabbi, notes that love, care, and concern can often turn into paternalism and that "the distance between a hug and a choke is hard to measure" (*Etnachta*, p. 333).

In fact, one of the most often quoted midrashim concerning the revelation at Sinai refers unapologetically to this very lack of freedom of choice:

<p><b>BT Shabbat 88a</b></p> <p>The Torah says, "And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the lowermost part of the mount" (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.</p>	<p><b>תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף פח עמוד א</b></p> <p>ויתצבו בתחתית ההר, אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא קבורתכם.</p>
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In his commentary R. Lau wonders whether this model of relationship is ultimately dysfunctional and in need of repair. After all, in most aspects of our personal lives, a sense of being trapped or of being unduly pressured will push us to flee or separate. A connection or relationship that is forced upon us will seldom set root in our heart, and our lack of ownership or partnership will cause us to shirk from responsibility.

The haftorah chosen by the rabbis for the Book of Numbers seems to offer a corrective, alternate model. The prophet Hosea offers a vision for a mature, covenantal relationship based on trust and mutual commitment:

<p><b>Hosea 2:21-22</b></p> <p>21 And I will betroth you to Me forever, and I will betroth you to Me with righteousness and with justice and with loving-kindness and with mercy. 22 And I will betroth you to Me with faith, and you shall know the Lord.</p>	<p><b>הושע פרק ב</b></p> <p>(כא) וְאַרְשִׁיתִיךָ לִי לְעוֹלָם וְאַרְשִׁיתִיךָ לִי בְצַדִּיק וּבְמִשְׁפָּט וּבְחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים: (כב) וְאַרְשִׁיתִיךָ לִי בְאֱמוּנָה וְיָדַעַת אֶת יְקֹוֹק:</p>
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Strange as this may sound, throughout the pandemic I've come to appreciate the religious freedoms that it afforded us. Prior to the pandemic, many of our religious observances were "forced" upon us through habituation and routine. Many of our practices happened because we've grown used to doing them. The pandemic, for better or worse, took that sense of "coercive" habituation away. Throughout this time, it was in many ways up to each and every one of us to determine and shape the content of our religious practice, at home and on our own. We were no longer being counted and it was truly up to us to account for our own actions. In light of that, the pandemic could become a potentially important moment of religious maturation for us as individuals and as a community. It allows us to shift away from Bamidbar's problematic model of dependence to Hosea's vision of love, faith, and mutual responsibility. This Shavuot, may we accept the yoke of Torah anew, in this very way.