

Making it Count: Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Value in Jewish Thought

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Sefer Bamidbar begins with God commanding Moshe “שאו את-ראש כל-עדת בני-ישראל”- Take a census of the whole Israelite company.”¹ Since counting is so central to the book that the *mishna* refers to it as *Chumash Hapekudim* (“The Book of Counting”), it is worth delving further into the nature of counting altogether.

Before looking at this week’s parsha, let’s first take a detour to a *sugya* in *Masechet Beitza* (3b). The following situation is presented: One prohibited egg is mixed in with 1000 permitted eggs, and you don’t know which egg is the prohibited one. Can the prohibited egg be nullified² and become permitted like the majority of the mixture? *Me’ikar hadin*, the strict understanding of the Torah law would suggest that the normal laws of *bitul* are applied, since the egg is most definitely nullified by the majority. However, the *gemara* limits the application of this principle in certain cases. To determine the ruling in this specific situation, the *gemara* needs to establish what is considered “חשוב” or “important,” meaning the item is valuable and therefore is too significant to simply disappear into the larger permitted mixture.

So, what is considered to be חשוב?

1. Rabbi Meir quoting Reish Lakish holds that “כל שדרכו לימנות”--meaning that things that are *sometimes* sold by unit are considered חשוב.
2. Rabbi Meir quoting Rabbi Yochanan holds that “את שדרכו לימנות”-- meaning that things that are *always* sold by unit are considered חשוב.
3. The Chachamim hold that only six specific items are considered חשוב.
4. Rabbi Akiva holds there are seven specific items that are considered חשוב.³

The four opinions in the Gemara can be grouped into two categories. On one side, Reish Lakish and R’ Yochanan suggest that the object obtains its חשוב status upon being counted when it becomes a *davar she’b’minyana* (“a thing that is counted”), implying that the value is extrinsic to the object. On the other side, the Chachamim and R’ Akiva hold that the חשוב status is intrinsic to the object.

¹ Bamidbar 1:2.

² When non-kosher food is accidentally mixed with kosher food, under certain circumstances, the non-kosher item can become nullified, and the combined mixture is considered to be kosher. The laws of nullification (*bitul*) are largely dependent on the ratio of the permitted substance to the prohibited substance.

³ This *machloket* is reflected in the *Rishonim*, with the Shulchan Aruch (YD 110:1) ruling like Rabbi Akiva and the Rema ruling like Rabbi Yochanan.



I want to suggest that the nature of this *machloket* reflects the same underlying tension between different rationales for the census in the beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*. Are only valuable objects counted, or is the process of counting what gives an object its value? In other words, is the value extrinsic and the object only becomes valuable once it is counted, as reasoned by Reish Lakish and R' Yochanan? Or do certain objects have intrinsic value, and therefore are worthy of being counted in their own right, as implied by the Chachamim and R' Akiva? For those more inclined towards Brisker methodology, is the *ikar* of an item's חשיבות determined by the *cheftza* or the *gavra*?

Extrinsic Value

In the first understanding, that the value is extrinsic, when discussing the census we can focus on the curious word שאו ("raise"), used to command the counting. The Ishbitzer Rebbe (1801-1854) writes:

שאו הוא לשון התנשאות היינו שע"י המנין יהיה לכל אחד ואחד התנשאות וכל אחד יהיה מדוגל... אך באמת כלל ישראל הם בלא מספר, ומ"ש והיה מספר נאמר על פרטי נפשות מישראל שיהיה כל אחד מספר, היינו דבר שבמנין ויהיה חשוב בעיני הש"י..."

"Raise" is an expression of elevation - that is, through the process of counting, every individual will feel heightened and supported... In fact, all of Israel is without number, and what is written "the number will be" is said over every single specific soul of Israel, that every single one will be counted, that is, something of consequence in the counting, and important in the eyes of the Holy Blessed One ...⁴

The Ishbitzer seems to suggest that counting is not simply a means of calculating the population, rather it actually confers dignity to each person. Though not explicit, by stating that counting yields a level of importance, the Ishbitzer seems to be invoking the laws of *bitul* and following the reasoning of Reish Lakish and R' Yochanan.

The commentators who view the census as necessary for practical reasons, (determining the layout of the camp⁵ or expediting the process of entry into the land of Israel⁶) would also fall into this category – that extrinsic value is the key. . This is because the count is not a way of expressing love, but rather helps with an external, albeit valuable, need.

Intrinsic Value

In his opening comment on *Sefer Bamidbar*, Rashi writes, "מתוך חבתן לפניו מונה אותם כל שעה" – Because they [Bnei Yisrael] were dear to Him, He counts them every now and then." This suggests that God wants to count Bnei Yisrael because of their intrinsic value.⁷

⁴ Mei Hashiloach, Section 1, Sefer Bamidbar.

⁵ Ibn Ezra, Bamidbar 1:1

⁶ Sforno, Bamidbar 1:2

⁷ Rashi's idea is echoed in Bamidbar Rabba 2:19

...ועוד מנה כל דגל ודגל בכלל ופרט, להודיע כמה היו חביבין לפניו, שהם היו צבאותיו ורוצה למנותן כל שעה, כאדם שיש לו גולה חביבה עליו ביותר והוא מונה וחוזר ומונה עד כמה פעמים, כדי שידע חשבונו וישמח בה על כל מנין ומנין....



The Shem Mishmuel (1855-1926), the second Sochatchover Rebbe, suggests this view as well:

והנה ענין המנין מורה שיהי' כל אחד דבר חשוב ואדון לעצמו ומושל ברוחו כענין דבר שבמנין שאינו בטל.
And here, the matter of the census teaches that every individual is an important entity, [who] rules over themselves, and has control over their spirit, just as something that is counted is not nullified.⁸

When discussing the census, the Shem Mishmuel explicitly invokes the laws of *bitul*, and in contrast to the Ishbitzer, seems to be relying on the approach of the Chachamim and R' Akiva.

So, Which One Is It?

Perhaps there's a middle ground – while value is intrinsic, something still happens through the process of counting.

Ramban suggests the reason behind the multiple censuses while Bnei Yisrael were in the desert was to להודיעם חסדו עליהם – make known God's loving kindness towards them," despite the hardships they faced in the desert. This seems to accord with Rashi and the Shem Mishmuel, who focus on Bnei Yisrael's intrinsic value. However, upon continuation, he adds another dimension to the counting.

אמר לו הקב"ה למנותם בכבוד ובגדולה לכל אחד ואחד. לא תהיה אומר לראש המשפחה "כמה במשפחתך?
כמה בנים יש לך?" אלא כולהון יהון עוברים לפניך באימה ובכבוד ואתה מונה אותם הדא הוא...

The Holy One Blessed be He ordered Moshe to count them in a manner that would confer honor and greatness on each one of them individually. Not that you should say to the head of the family, "How many are there in your family? How many children do you have?" But rather all of them should pass before you in awe and with the honor due to them and you should number them...⁹

Ramban suggests that while Bnei Yisrael's intrinsic holiness might prompt the counting, the process of counting has the ability to uplift individuals.

Similarly, on Parshat Bamidbar, in *Shenei Luchot HaBrit*, the Shelah Hakadosh (1555-1630) writes:

"He further counted each tribe generally and in detail, to inform us how dear they are to Him, for they were His hosts, and He wants to count them all the time. This may be likened to one who has a treasure that is particularly dear to him, and he counts it and counts it again several times, so that he might know its sum, and he takes pleasure in every count."

⁸ Parashat Mishpatim 14:7. Though this comment is written on Parshat Mishpatim, he later references to the word "לגלגלותם" which appears in Bamidbar 1:2. He repeats the idea in his writings on this week's parsha when he writes: באה המצוה למנותם כי דבר שבמנין חשוב ואינו בטל

⁹ On Bamidbar 1:45



המנין היה כדי להשרות עליהם שכינה. כל אדם יעשה כן יחשוב את עצמו לדבר שבמנין, וכאלו הכל תלוי בו. גם יחשוב הכל תלוי בפעולתו...

The purpose of the count was to enable God's presence to take up residence among the Jewish people. Everyone should become aware of his personal value by having been counted. [Everyone] should think that everything depends on their personal activity and contribution...

To further expand upon this idea, the Shelah employs the *sugya* in *Masechet Beitza* previously discussed.

אף שמחלוקתם הוא בדבר שבמנין לענין דינא, מכל מקום רמז נפלא בדבריהם בסוד דבר שבמנין....
Although the argument between these sages concerns matters of *halakhah*, their disagreement reveals a deep insight into the relative worth of things that are subject to numbering....¹⁰

This insight is concisely explained by the Lubavitcher Rebbe (1902-1994):

It states in the Shelah that by counting Bnei Yisrael (direct translation-Yidden) they became a "*davar she'b'minyan*." That which a *davar she'b'minyan* is not nullified, in the same way that other valued (חשוב) things are not nullified such as a living creature etc. For in those items, the value of the object is, in itself, apparent. One can openly discern that it is different from other things. However a "*davar she'b'minyan*" that is not nullified, is because through counting the object, one shows that it has value, and therefore is not nullified. However, the value (חשיבות) is not apparent and recognizable in the individual object.¹¹

Consistent with Ramban, the Shelah, as explained by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, believes intrinsically valuable objects can themselves gain even more value when counted.

Perhaps the census's ambiguity reflects Bnei Yisrael's evolving identity as we end *Sefer Vayikra* and begin *Sefer Bamidbar*. Bnei Yisrael is transitioning from being a nation that receives instructions regarding how to be holy – that is, how to cultivate extrinsic holiness – to a nation learning how to implement the "holiness guidebook" and cultivate intrinsic holiness.

May we find inspiration from the implicit rationales in both the *machloket* found in the Gemara, as well as the differing approaches to the purpose of the census in *Sefer Bamidbar*. May we follow in the footsteps of R' Akiva and the Chachamim, *Bamidbar Rabba*, Rashi, and find the *חשיבות*, the intrinsic value and worth that is within ourselves. May we also be blessed with ease as we find intrinsic *חשיבות* in others. And if those around us are finding it hard to remember their *חשיבות*, or perhaps they are forgetting לפנינו – כמה היו חביבין לפנינו – how dear they are to us – may we feel inspired and empowered by Reish Lakish and R' Yochanan's rulings, and the lessons

¹⁰ Shenei Luchot HaBrit, Torah Shebikhtav, Torah Ohr, Bamidbar 35

¹¹ *Lekutei Sichot, Volume 18, Bamidbar (5740), page 25.*



from Ramban and the Ishbitzer, to lift up others through counting or other means, until they feel adequately elevated and supported.



After spending a year studying at Midreshet Lindenbaum, Sarah attended Binghamton University where she earned a BA in Politics, Philosophy & Law, and a Master's in Public Administration. She has taught and has held administrative positions in a variety of educational settings including Camp Stone, Friendship Circle, Brandeis' Genesis Pre-college Program, the Drisha Institute, and the Maimonides School. Sarah has spent the past few years working in a variety of political, advocacy and education spaces, including organizing for political campaigns for a year and a half organizing for political campaigns leading up to the 2020 election in Nevada, Texas and Arizona. Sarah is excited to be relocating to New York City to begin the Core Semikha Program at Yeshivat Maharat. In her free time, Sarah loves taking long walks, listening to podcasts, trying new recipes, and spending time in nature.