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Parshat Pinchas: On Being Counted Rabba Sara Hurwitz

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In Parshat Pinchas, between the story of Pinchas' zealotry and B'not Zlophchad's request to inherit their father's land, the Torah interrupts the narrative with another census.

Take the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, from twenty years old and upward, by their fathers' houses, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel. (Bamidbar 26:2)

שאו את ראש | כל עדת בני ישראל מן
עשרים שנה ומעלה לבית אבתם כל
יצא צבא בישראל: (במדבר כו:ב)

This is the third census that has occurred in the Torah. The people were counted after the Exodus from Egypt, in the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar, and now once again. What is the Torah's obsession with counting the people?

The nature of this census, according to Rashi, is for God to count his people after 24,000 were lost to plague in *Shittim*, where "the people had begun to commit znut (harlotry) with the daughter of Maov (Bamidbar 25:1)." Rashi explains:

This can be compared to a shepherd whose flock was intruded by wolves who killed some of them [his sheep]. He counted them to know how many were left (Rashi 26:1).

ויהי אחרי המגפה וגו': משל לרועה שנכנסו
זאבים לתוך עדרו והרגו בהן והוא מונה אותן
לידע מנין הנותרות. (רש"י כו:א)

Just like a shepherd counts his sheep after wolves have ravished them, so too God wanted to know the number of his children who had survived the plague.

At first glance, the comparison to sheep conveys an image of a mass of nameless animals, each one impossible to distinguish from the next. However, surely a shepherd can differentiate one sheep from another, and each lost sheep is a tremendous loss. This is true for God as well. It is easier to say that there are 300 people in a room, rather than name everyone individually. And yet, the point of the census was to account for each individual. For even one loss of life, for God, was painful.

In fact, when the Torah explains in verse 51 that the sum total of the community is comprised of 601,730 men, the message is not that there are 600,000 nameless people, but 600,000 individuals. The number 600,000, "shishim ribo" is actually a metaphor for the sum total of individuals. This number mysteriously repeats itself. The children of Israel number approximately 600,000 when they leave Egypt. A year later, this number appears again when the people are counted after forty years in the wilderness. Once again the number settles around 600,000. Our sages considered "shishim ribo" as the sum total of distinct individual personalities.

The Ramban explains:

Our Sages received a tradition that only 600,000 faces were created, and this number includes all personalities. Therefore the Torah was given to this number. They said, that the Torah needed to be given

to be acceptable to all personalities, and since the Creator knows the personality of all creatures and creates the minds of all, therefore [the Torah is given to 600,000].

The Torah is given to 600,000 individuals. It is no wonder then, that the census is framed by the story of individuals—of Pinchas and B’not Zlophchadx - Machlah, Noah, Choglah, Milcah, and Tirzah—to emphasize just one more time that our Torah is a book about humanity, about people. And it is individuals, not a mass of nameless people, who make up our community.

When I learned with the Shalom Hartman Institute in 2015, they took us to south Tel Aviv, where we met with “strangers in a strange land.” Before 2013, 46,000 asylum seekers from Sudan and Eritrea managed to escape their war-ridden countries, seeking refuge in Israel. Because of fear of mass immigration, Israel erected a fence around the Sinai border in 2013, limiting the number of people seeking refuge in Israel’s borders. Up until recently these people have been largely ignored by Israeli society.

But, now that there are a definitive number of refugees, what should Israel’s obligation be? Many look at the faceless mass and hope that they return to their dangerous communities, where they surely have no future. They are not provided work permits and are given very little government aide. But then we met Israelis who began to take note of the plight of the individual refugees. We met Yael Gvitz who noticed the instability and discrimination that these people face and founded [Elifelet](#), a non-profit organization that cares for 400 children and infants from over 70 day care centers. We met Chariot, who runs a daycare center from her home. Forty children—babies until four year olds - were cramped into a small space. When we entered, 3 year olds came running to us, with arms raised, wide eyes and sweet smiles, wanting to be hugged and loved. One little girl clung on, unwilling to let me put her down. And we met Barrik, a refugee, who was determined to go to university. Four years later, after taking all the relevant exams, he is waiting to hear if he will be accepted into university in Israel. One of the Eritrean Asylum Seekers told us: “It is hard here in Israel. But I believe if anyone is going to get this right, it is the Jews.”

I was heartened to learn that the Hartman Institute has agreed to adopt one of these 70 centers that desperately need financial support and volunteers to help the community. There are 47,000 refugees. Israel is just beginning to explore how to count them. How to look in their faces, and understand their needs, and to make them feel counted amongst the extended community of Israel.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha’s three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week’s 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek’s 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.