

Haftarot Unrolled: Bamidbar

Immeasurable

Parshat Bamidbar is the first Parsha in the fourth book of the Chumash. In addition to being called Sefer Bamidbar, it is also called Sefer HaPekudim, the Book of Numbers. The reason for this name is that Bamidbar contains two long census counts of the Jewish People, one at the beginning of the book, in Parshat Bamidbar, and one near the end.

The Haftarah of Bamidbar, from the prophet Hoshea, also begins with numbers:

וְהָיָה מִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּחֹל הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִמָּד וְלֹא יִסָּפֵר

The number of children of Israel will be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured and cannot be numbered (Hoshea 2:1)

There are several Midrashim¹ that use this verse in the Haftarah to expound upon Parshat Bamidbar. They ask the following question:

א"ר שמלאי מהו הדבר הזה מי שהוא אומר שיש להם מספר הוא חוזר ואומר להם שאין ?
R' Smalai says: What is this, that the same One who says that they are countable, goes back and says that they are not countable?

If they cannot be measured and cannot be numbered, then what is this "number" that Hoshea refers to?

Moreover, if they cannot be measured and cannot be numbered, then what is the purpose of the Book of Numbers?

To answer this question, the Midrash brings another case where this apparent paradox occurs. Back at the beginning of Jewish history, G-d said to Avraham:

...וַיֹּאמֶר הֶבֱט נָא הַשְּׁמַיִמָּה וּסְפֹר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם תּוּכַל לִסְפֹּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה זַרְעֶךָ :
...He said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars. Can you count them?" He said, "Thus will be your descendants." (Breishit 15:5)

The Midrash asks the same question regarding Avraham:

מה הדבר הזה וספור הכוכבים אם תוכל לספור מי שאמר וספור חוזר ואומר אם תוכל לספור
What is this, "count the stars, can you count them?" The One who said, "count" goes back and says, "can you count them?"

Which is it, then, are the Jewish People countable, or not?

The Midrash explains the metaphor of comparing Israel to the stars:

¹Bamidbar Rabba 2: 14-18

להודיעך שהראה אותו תחלה במספר אחד ואח"כ שנים ואח"כ שלשה ואח"כ שנים עשר ואח"כ ע' ואח"כ הראה לו מזלות שאין להם מספר. ולמה הראה אותו כך? סימן הראה אותו שהוא מרבה אותן כך בעולם, הראה אותו אחד שמתחלה הוא היה יחיד... חזר והראה אותו שנים אברהם ויצחק חזר והראה אותו שלשה אברהם יצחק ויעקב וחזר והראה אותו שנים עשר שבטים ואח"כ ע' כנגד ע' נפש שירדו למצרים ואח"כ הראה אותו מזלות שאין להם מספר שישראל עתידין לפרות ולרבות באחרונה שאין להם מספר... ואף להושע שהראהו במספר ושלא במספר שתחלתן היו במספר וחזרו ורבו שלא במספר לכך נאמר אשר לא ימד ולא יספר וגו',

The purpose was to tell you that He first showed him one star, then two, then three, then twelve, then seventy, and then He showed him constellations that cannot be counted.

And why did He show it to him in this manner? To convey to him that this is the manner in which He increases their numbers in the world.

At first, there was just one person (Avraham), then two (Avraham and Yitzchak), then three (Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov), then the twelve tribes, then the seventy people who went down to Egypt. Finally, He showed him constellations that cannot be counted, as the Jewish People multiplied greatly until ultimately they would not be countable. So, too, Hoshea - G-d showed them to his as countable, and then uncountable; at first they were countable, and then later they multiplied greater, and were not countable, as it says, "that cannot be measured and cannot be counted."

Jewish History unfolded gradually, like stars appearing in the evening sky. At first, only a few are visible, and then more and more until all of a sudden, the sky is full of stars. At first, it was only the forefathers, then the seventy people who went down to Egypt, and then, in Bamidbar, there were 600,000. The counting of the Jewish People in Bamidbar is necessary to show that G-d's promise to Avraham has come to pass. The Jewish People, who started out as a few individuals, are now a nation of hundreds of thousands.

But this is not yet the stage of "uncountable". The Midrash which asks the question on the Haftarah explains the distinction between 600,000 and "uncountable":

אלא בזמן שאין עושין רצונו של מקום יש להם מספר שאין חסרים ממנין ששים רבוא והיה מספר ובזמן שהם עושין רצונו של מקום אין להם מספר

When they don't do G-d's will, they are countable, and they are no less than 600,000; but when they do G-d's will, they are uncountable.

600,000 is a minimum. At Bamidbar, the Jewish People reached the critical mass at which they can be called a nation, and can begin fulfilling their mission. This is why they are counted now, just as they are about to leave Sinai and head for the Land of Israel². The Midrash asserts that even if the Jewish People fail at their mission, G-d will not allow their population to dip lower than the 600,000 national minimum. But, when we succeed at our mission, not only do our numbers go up, we become "uncountable."

Our mission originates with Avraham as well. Back in Breishit, G-d tells us why Avraham was chosen, why he was the first star to appear in the sky. He says:

² If not for the complaints, the hesitations, and the sin of the spies, they would have been there in days.

כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת אחרייו ושמרו דרכי ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט...
For I know him; that he will command his children, and his family after him; they will keep the way of Hashem, to do righteousness and justice (Breishit 18:19)

The "way of Hashem", the mission, that Avraham will teach his descendants is "to do righteousness and justice." "Justice" is when laws are enforced in an even-handed and fair manner. "Righteousness" is when justice is not purely blind, but is tempered with goodness. It is a difficult balance, yet G-d trusted Avraham not only to achieve it, but to pass it on to his descendants.

When the Jewish People, the descendants of Avraham, do G-d's will, and act with justice and righteousness, they become more than a collection of individuals. Their influence extends far beyond their own sphere, and it is not in direct proportion to their numbers. In this way, they become "uncountable."

The Haftarah, which began by saying that the Jewish People cannot be measured and cannot be counted, ends by saying that their relationship with G-d will be expressed through justice and righteousness:

וארשתיך לי לעולם
וארשתיך לי בצדק ובמשפט
ובחסד וברחמים:
וארשתיך לי באמונה
וידעת את ה':

I will betroth you to Me forever,
I will betroth You to Me, through righteousness and justice,
through kindness and mercy.
I will betroth you to Me through faithfulness,
and you will know Hashem (Hoshea 2:21-22).

The Jewish People are counted in the Book of Numbers at the beginning of our mission to do G-d's will. Over the millenia, we have sometimes succeeded and sometimes failed. We have been countable, in numbers not much greater than our baseline, and yet we have influenced the world in ways that cannot be quantified. As long as we continue to follow Avraham's example of walking in the ways of G-d with righteousness and justice, our contribution to humanity will be immeasurable.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l
לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל