

Bamidbar

By Melanie Kelly

We are taught that each time God counts us it is an act of love. This week, in Bemidbar, we are being counted for the third time since our departure from Egypt. The first time we are counted as we depart is to show the Israelites that they have been blessed. The second time we are counted is after the incident with the Golden Calf to determine the number of survivors. Why then are we being counted at the beginning of this new book of Bemidbar? We are in the wilderness, and we know it, and yet nothing seems to have happened for us to be counted.

In order to understand this census and its purpose, we need to understand the chronology of the story of the Israelites up to this point and the fact that the chronology is not always according to the linear reading of the Torah. The Parasha opens with the announcement that it is 1st day of the 2nd month of the 2nd year since the Exodus. If we recall Parasha Pikudei (Shemot 38:21 - 40) we are told that the Mishkan was set up a month previously on the 1st day of the 1st month of the 2nd year. Therefore the whole of Leviticus (apart from Behar and Bechukotai, which refer back to the time on Mount Sinai), with all its laws and procedures for the workings of the tabernacle occurred during this first month of Nisan. We also read that in the month of Nisan the offerings were made by each of the chieftains of the tribes as described in Naso - which we read next week. Consequently the start of this new book with its call for a census is chronologically in the wrong order.

There is a Rabbinic concept known as "Eim mukdam u'muchar ba-Torah" – 'there is no before or after in the Torah', Pesakim 6b, Rashi and others. This idea suggests that the order in which we read Torah is not necessarily the order in which the events occurred. However that does not mean order without reason; there must be a reason that this census was placed at the beginning of this book with such a specific reference to the date at which it commenced. If we return to Pekudei, we learn that having established the Tabernacle, God's presence, in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, descended into it and God dwelt amongst the Children of Israel. In fact when God originally gives the commands for a Mishkan (in Terumah) he asks for it to be built, not so that God can dwell in it, but so that it can be used as a conduit for God to dwell among the people as an ultimate act of love. Seen in this light the purpose of the census is therefore another act of love by God of the people; it marks each person as someone God will live with.

Melanie Kelly is a member of Kol Nefesh Masorti Syangogue

2013