**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**PARASHAT BAMIDBAR**

**Who Needs This Census?**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

I. The purpose of the census In Arvot Moav and the question of its purpose in our *Parasha*

1:1. And the Lord spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: 

1:2: Take you the sum of all the congregation of the Israelites, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, by their polls;

1:3: From twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to the host of Israel: you shall count them by their hosts, even you and Aharon. 

1:4: And with you there shall be a man of every tribe, every one head of his fathers' house.

The Book of *Bamidbar*, which is referred to in the Mishna as "the Volume of Accountings" (*Chumash Ha-pekudim*),opens with a command to count the Israelites. Similarly, toward the end of the book, in the fortieth year after the Jewish people comes out of Egypt, in their final encampment before crossing the Jordan at Arvot Moav (Moabite Plains), God commands that the Israelites be counted:

26:1: And it came to pass after the plague,

That the Lord spoke to Moshe and to Elazar the son of Aharon the priest, saying:

26:2: Take the sum of all the congregation of the Israelites, from twenty years old and upward, by their fathers' houses, all that are able to go forth to the host of Israel.

A comparison of these two commands reveals several differences between them, but one striking difference — which concerns the censuses' objectives — becomes clear when we consider the end of Chapter 26.

With the conclusion of the census data of the Israelites — the data relating to each individual tribe and the total number of Israelites — the objective of this census is revealed:

52: And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: 

53: To these the land shall be divided for an inheritance according to the number of names.

54: To the more you shall give the more inheritance, and to the less you shall give the less inheritance; to each one according to those that are counted of it shall its inheritance be given.

Later in the chapter, the number of Levites is given separately from the number of Israelites, and this separation is explained by the Torah as follows:

62: For they were not counted among the Israelites, because there was no inheritance given them among the Israelites.

The purpose of the census taken at Arvot Moav is clear: it is a preparatory step for dividing up the land, which will be distributed among the tribes, but with consideration of the numbers of people in each tribe who are entitled to receive an inheritance.

In contrast to the clear reason offered for the census in Arvot Moav, no explicit reason is given for the census with which our book opens. Why does God command Moshe to conduct a census at this time and in this place: "in the wilderness of Sinai… on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt"? This is the question raised by Rav Yitzchak Abarbanel at the beginning of his commentary on the *parasha*, which we use as the title of this article.

As with the census taken in the fortieth year, so too at the end of the census of the second year, it is stated that the Levites are not included:

1:48: And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: 

49: However the tribe of Levi you shall not count, neither shall you take the sum of them among the Israelites.

However, unlike with the census in Arvot Moav, here the reason is not explicitly stated. Perhaps there is an allusion to the reason in the following verse:

50: But appoint you the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all the furniture thereof, and over all that belongs to it; they shall bear the tabernacle, and all the furniture thereof; and they shall minister to it, and shall encamp round about the tabernacle.

Why does this role of the Levites constitute a reason that they should not be counted together with the rest of the Israelites? Perhaps the answer to this question will offer us a clue as to the purpose of the census of the Israelites itself.

The absence of an explicit reason for God's command to count the Israelites at this time leads the commentators to raise various hypotheses in this regard. In the following sections, we will discuss some of the different answers offered by commentators to this question.

### II. "TO establish the banners" — The answer offered by Ibn Ezra and the difficulty with it

Some commentators connect the reason of this census to its date, “on the first day of the second month, in the second year.” Less than three weeks later, on the twentieth of the month, the Israelites will leave Mount Sinai, where they have been camped for close to a year (since “the third month after the Israelites had gone forth out of the land of Egypt," *Shemot* 19:1) and begin their great journey:

10:11: And it came to pass in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, that the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle of testimony.

12: And the Israelites journeyed by their stages out of the wilderness of Sinai…

Why does this upcoming event require that the Israelites be counted?

This is ibn Ezra's answer, which he gives in his commentary to the first verse in our chapter:

"On the first day of the second month" — to establish the banners, and how they will journey and how they will camp as the sanctuary moves, for on the twentieth of the month they are to set out on their journey.

According to the ibn Ezra, the purpose of the census is to establish the order of journeying and camping in the wilderness around the *Mishkan*. The division of the tribes under four banners, by the four compass directions, around the *Mishkan* when in the camp — as well as the instructions regarding the setting forth of these banners when the cloud rises, which will appear in Chapter 2 — are based on the census of the people in Chapter 1.

However, ibn Ezra's answer does not take into consideration the distinction between Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.

If the purpose of the census is as he argues, it would be possible to spare ourselves the striking redundancy in the two chapters and offer the census data directly when the tribes are divided under banners, as the numbers for each tribe are in fact reiterated in Chapter 2.[[1]](#footnote-1) This would have spared almost all of the lengthy first chapter! But Chapter 1 teaches that the census regarding which Moshe is commanded has importance in itself, regardless of the use that may be made of the census data for the instructions regarding the camp arrangements in Chapter 2.

Another argument against ibn Ezra's explanation is found in the words of the Ramban at 1:45, where the Ramban deals at length with the reason for the census:

I do not understand the reason for this mitzva [of the census], why the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded it. While it was necessary that they trace their lineage to their tribes, for the sake of the banners, I do not know why He commanded that they know the number.

That is to say, for the sake of dividing the people into four banner-camps, it would suffice for each person to trace his lineage to a tribe, and it would not be necessary to know the count of each tribe (appearing in both Chapter 1 and Chapter 2) and the number of members of the three tribes that unite under a single banner (appearing only in Chapter 2).

Because of this argument, the Ramban seeks other reasons for the census that do not depend on the banners and the organization of the camp. While there is room to discuss the Ramban's position and argue that the arrangement of the banners does indeed require knowledge of the numbers of each tribe, nevertheless the Ramban is correct in seeking other reasons for counting the Israelites, those that explain the command in Chapter 1 to conduct a census and its execution in themselves, independent of the use of the results of this census in Chapter 2.

### III. "because of the combat troops" — The answer offered by the Rashbam et al. and the difficulty with it

The Rashbam as well hangs the reason for the census on the date, but without connecting it to Chapter 2:

"Take you the sum of the congregation" — For from this point forward they must go to Eretz Israel, and twenty-year-olds are fit to go out to war. For on the twentieth of the second month, the cloud rose, as it is stated in *Parashat Beha'alotekha* (10:11), and it is written there (10:29): "We are journeying to the place [of which the Lord said: I will give it you]." Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded at the beginning of this month to count them.

The reason for this census is similar to the reason for most of the censuses described later in *Tanakh*: preparation for war.[[2]](#footnote-2) In less than three weeks, Israel's journey through the wilderness will begin, the immediate purpose of which is to be (were it not for the Sin of the Spies) to reach Eretz Israel and conquer it through war. Hence, it is necessary to assess the military force available for this mission, "and so the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded at the beginning of this month to count them."

This explanation is given not only based on logical grounds — in consideration of the circumstances in which this census is conducted and based on knowledge of what is written later in the book — but also based on what is stated in this census itself:

3: From twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to the host (*kol yotzei tzava*) in Israel, you shall count them by their hosts…

The Rashbam infers from this verse: "And twenty-year olds are fit to go out to war."

Both the age — twenty[[3]](#footnote-3) — and the expression, "all that are able to go forth to the host," teach about the military purpose of this census.

When he comes to explain the end of our chapter, the Rashbam (v. 47) continues the interpretative approach that he adopts at the beginning of the chapter, and thus he explains the omission of the Levites in the census of the Israelites as follows:

"However the tribe of Levi you shall not count,” etc. (v. 49) — And the reason is clear, because they will not go out to war. Rather: "appoint you the Levites over the tabernacle of testimony, etc." (v. 50 and on).

This reason for conducting the census appears also in the commentaries of Ri Bekhor Shor (v. 1) and Chizkuni (vv. 2-3, 49), and it stands to reason that they take it from the Rashbam.

The Ramban as well raises this possibility in the discussion that he conducts in his commentary to the end of our chapter (v. 45) regarding the reason for the census. This is the third possibility that he raises:

It is further possible that this was like what kings do when they go out to war. For now they were ready to enter the land and to wage war against the Amorite kings on the other side of the Jordan and all the rest of them, as he said: "We are journeying to the place of which the Lord said" (10:29). It was necessary for Moshe and the princes to know the number of soldiers, and so too the number of each tribe, and what he would command it in Arvot Moav in battle,[[4]](#footnote-4) because the Torah does not rely on miracles, that one will pursue a thousand.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is the reason for "all that are able to go forth to the host" (v. 3) — because of the combat troops.

The modern commentators as well adopt this approach,[[6]](#footnote-6) which they view as not requiring proof.

It must, however, be said that Chapter 1 itself does not give such an impression at all. There is no hint in this chapter of an impending war, and there is no sound of clashing swords in the background. No army captains are appointed to head the people (see *Devarim* 20:9), and there is no mention of the hierarchical structure of an army.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Not only is no impression given in our chapter of preparing for war, but so too in the description of the first journey on the twentieth of the month (10:11-28), no such impression is given.[[8]](#footnote-8) Even in *Parashat Shelach,* when the Israelites reach the border of Eretz Israel and send out spies to scout it out, there is no mention of preparations for war.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The commentators whose words are cited above base their remarks among other things on the instructions regarding the census in our chapter – in verse 3: "From twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to the host (*kol yotzei tzava*)in Israel"!

The Ramban, who at the end of his comment above also bases his explanation on verse 3, struggles with the question of how necessary the explanation is. At the outset, he cites Rashi's commentary: "This tells us that no one less than twenty years of age goes forth to the *tzava*." At first, the Ramban explains this based on the conventional understanding that the word *tzava* means "army":

It is possible that the reason for this is that a person is not strong enough for battle when he is less than twenty, as [the Rabbis] have said (*Avot* 5:21): "At age twenty — to pursue."

Immediately, however, the Ramban proposes a different explanation of the words: "From twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to the host (*kol yotzei tzava*) in Israel":

It is possible, however, that the meaning of *kol yotzei tzava* is "all that go out to be assembled **in the congregation"** [that is, in the Israelites as a whole, and not combat troops], because the young lads [who are less than twenty years old] do not assemble among the people [not because of physical weakness, but on count of immaturity]. **For every gathering of the people is called *tzava*,** and similarly: to join the host (*li-tzvo*)of the service of the Tent of Meeting;[[10]](#footnote-10) "he shall return from the host (*mi-tzeva*) of the service" (8:25); "the mirrors of the women who joined the host (*ha-tzove’ot*)" (*Shemot* 38:8); and similarly "host (*tzeva*)of the heavens" [a phrase found about twenty times in *Tanakh*]; "and all their host (*tzeva'am*)[of the heavens] have I commanded" (*Yeshayahu* 45:12). Therefore it is stated explicitly about combat troops: "from the host**of the war** *(mi-tzeva ha-milchama)"* (*Bamidbar* 31:4); "reckoned by genealogy in the host**in war** *(ba-tzava ba-milchama***)**" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 7:40). And that which it says here: "all that are able **to go forth** to the host" [which at first glance accords with those who go out to war] is like: "all that went out of the gate of his city *(kol yotze’ei sha’ar iro)*" (*Bereishit* 34:24).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Support for the argument that the word *tzava* in Chapter 1 refers not to the army, but to the entire congregation, may be brought from the fact that there is no upper limit to the age of those counted, but rather: "from twenty years old and upward," which includes even very old people.[[12]](#footnote-12) When a census is conducted for a specific purpose, e.g., war or service in which the counted parties must engage, not only a minimal age, but also a maximal age should be set.

4:2: Take the sum of the Kohathites from among the Levites by their families, by their fathers' houses.

4:3: From thirty years old and upward **even until fifty years old**, all that enter upon the service, to do work in the Tent of Meeting.

It turns out, therefore, that the explanation accepted by some of the greatest expositors of the plain sense of the biblical text, that the purpose of the census in Chapter 1 is to prepare for war, is not compelled by the plain sense of our chapter — neither by the spirit of the chapter, nor by its wording.

**III. The Explanation of Rav Ovadya Seforno**

In addition to the commentators following the simple meaning of the verse, we have the unique explanation of Rav Ovadya Seforno. First, we must offer a brief preface.

Seforno argues in a number of places that if the Jewish people had immediately entered Eretz Israel, in the proper time, without the Sin of the Spies, no combat would have been required. The inhabitants of the land would have cleared out, leaving the entire country to the Jews, in peace and quiet.[[13]](#footnote-13) Naturally, Seforno cannot accept the explanation of Rashbam et al., that the census is designed to prepare for the military conquest of Eretz Israel. Nevertheless, he is not far off from the Rashbam’s approach:

“Take you the sum” — to arrange them in order to enter the land immediately, each man by his banner without combat; rather, the nations would leave before them, as some in fact did… [[14]](#footnote-14)

However the Spies ruined it, as these seven nations continued to do evil for the next forty years, making it necessary to exterminate them [and this is why the Israelites had to engage them in combat].

If so, why is Moshe ultimately commanded to count the Israelites before their entry into the Eretz Israel, if this is not meant to require combat? Seforno goes on to explain:

This let them know that the intent [of the census] was that those people themselves [who were counted] should live and inherit the land, and none of them should perish.

The aim of the census, in any case, is to illustrate and stress the miracle of entering the Land of Israel, destined to be without combat or loss of life. Such an aim is very far from the horizon of Chapter 1 in our book. Just as in our chapter there is no hint of impending battle, and the atmosphere is one of tranquilly and celebration (Seforno is correct in this aspect of his reading), there is no hint of an imminent entry into the Land of Canaan.

### IV. "to inform them of his lovingkindness" and "Merit" — the answers offered by the Ramban and the difficulties with them

The Ramban, some of whose comments we have already cited in the previous sections, proposes two additional answers to his question regarding "knowing the number" of the people: "the reason for this mitzva*,* why the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded it." Here are the first two answers that he gives to this question:

Perhaps it was to inform them of His lovingkindness toward them, for their forefathers went down to Egypt with seventy persons, and now they are like the sand of the seashore (see *Devarim* 10:22), such-and-such twenty-year olds. After every plague He would count them to inform them that He "increases the nations" (*Iyov* 12:22), "He wounds, and His hands make whole" (*Iyov* 5:18). This is what our Rabbis said: Out of His great love for them — He counts them all the time.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Furthermore, because one who appears before the father of the prophets and his brother, the holy one of the Lord, and becomes known to them by name, enjoys through this merit and life, for he enters the council of the people and the register of the Israelites (see *Yechezkel* 13:9), and the merit of the community lies in their number.[[16]](#footnote-16) So too all of them enjoy merit through the number by which they would be counted before Moshe and Aharon,[[17]](#footnote-17) for they would set their eyes on them for good, pleading for mercy for them: "The Lord, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times so many more as you are" (*Devarim* 1:11), and not diminish your numbers.

Both of the Ramban's answers are different from all of the explanations that we have seen thus far. They do not connect the present census to the particular time or place when and where it was conducted: "in the wilderness of Sinai… on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt."

The first answer — "to inform them of His lovingkindness toward them" — addresses this difficulty, arguing that in truth this particular time has no significance, for "for He counts them all the time."[[18]](#footnote-18) Earlier, however, the Ramban says that "after every plague He would count them," and this does not fit the current census, which is not conducted after a plague.

Similarly, the second reason offered by the Ramban for the census is not connected to the unique circumstances in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the Book of *Bamidbar*: the merit enjoyed by the individual and the community when he is counted by Moshe and Aharon applies at all times, so why then does God command that Israel be counted specifically at this time?

V. "WHen he was about to rest his *Shekhina* upon them" – the answer offered by Rashi and the difficulty with it

After all this, we come to the words of Rashi in his commentary to the first verse in the Book of *Bamidbar*: "And the Lord spoke… in the wilderness of Sinai… on the first day of the second month":

Because they are dear to Him, He counts them all the time.

When they went forth from Egypt He counted them, and then when they fell [in consequence of their having worshipped] the Golden Calf He counted them to ascertain the number of those left.

When He was about to rest His Presenceupon them He [again] counted them. For on the first day of Nisan the tabernaclewas erected, and on the first day of Iyar He counted them.

Before discussing in detail the reason that Rashi gives for the census in our *parasha*, we must note several points regarding his comments:

1. The words upon which Rashi comments are found in verse 1, but his comments come to explain the command in verse 2: "Take you the sum of all the congregation of the Israelites"! The answer to this is that Rashi does not come to explain all of verse 1, but rather the words: "On the first day of the second month, in the second year." Rashi comes to answer the question why the command to count Israel comes specifically on this day, and the answer appears at the end of his comment: "On the first day of Nisan the tabernaclewas erected, and on the first day of Iyar He counted them" — the date of the census is exactly one month after the erection of the *Mishkan*, and there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the earlier date and the later one.
2. Even though Rashi comes to resolve an exegetical difficulty that anyone studying our *parasha* would raise — what is the reason for this census at the particular time that it is conducted? — it is amazing how his opening remarks to our book fit in with his opening remarks with which he begins his commentary to the four other books of the Torah. In each book of the Torah, Rashi opens with God's special relationship toward Israel:[[19]](#footnote-19)

* *Bereishit*: What is the reason, then, that it commences with the Creation? Because of: "He declared to His people the strength of His works, in order that He might give them the heritage of the nations" (*Tehillim* 111:6).
* *Shemot*: Even though the verse has already enumerated them by name while they were living, it again enumerates them when it tells of their death, thus showing how **dear** they were to God…
* *Vayikra*: All instances of [God's] speech, or statement, or command are preceded by a call, as a way of showing **affection**… To the prophets of the nations of the world, however, God revealed Himself in a casual manner…
* *Bamidbar*: Because they are **dear** to Him, He counts them all the time.
* *Devarim*: Because they are words of reproof… therefore He suppressed the matters and refers to them only by allusion out of **respect** for Israel.

What are Rashi's midrashic sources? Rashi seems to use two *midrashim* in *Bamidbar Rabba*.

The first is2, 19:

"These are they that were counted of the Israelites by their fathers' houses" (2:32) — Come and see how dear are Israel to God, for the Holy One, blessed be He, wrote the sum of Israel **four times**in the banners [= in the census described at the beginning of *Bamidbar*], twice in detail [= specifying the number of each tribe], and twice generally [= with the total of all the Israelites — 1:46; 2:32). 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 each count. So the Holy One, blessed be He, is pleased mentioning the count of Israel….

The other *midrash* is 2, 11:

Israel is counted in ten places: Once, when they went down to Egypt… And once when they went out (*Shemot* 12:37): "And the Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Sukkot, about six hundred thousand men on foot, beside children." And once after the sin involving the golden calf (*Shemot* 30:12): "When you take the sum of the Israelites, according to their counting." And twice in the book of *Bamidbar* — once with the banners and once with the division of the land… [[20]](#footnote-20)

This *midrash* lists five places where Israel is counted in the Torah.[[21]](#footnote-21) Rashi omits the first of them, which is not a count of the Israelites, but of the family of Ya’akov; and also the last one, in *Parashat Pinchas*, which is not our present concern; and thus he is left with three counts, by way of which the principle appearing at the beginning of his words — "Because they are dear to Him, He counts them all the time" — is realized.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Regarding the count when Israel leaves Egypt, it should be noted that we are not dealing with a census of the people, but rather with the Torah's numerical assessment, that Israel counted at that time "about six hundred thousand men on foot."

To prove the count after the Sin of the Golden Calf, the Midrash cites the verse: "When you take the sum of the Israelites" (*Shemot* 30:12). The census dealing with the half-shekel is part of the command regarding the erection of the tabernacle, which is recorded in the Torah **before** the sin involving the Golden Calf. The position of this *midrash* is like that of many other *midrashim* (though not all of them), and like that of Rashi, that the command regarding the building of the *Mishkan* is stated **after** the Sin of the Golden Calf, but is written before it in the manner of a later story that is recorded earlier in a narrative.

However, even according to the position that maintains that the events take place in the order in which they are written in the Torah, we could bring the verses in *Parashat Pekudei* (*Shemot* 38:25-26), which imply that the Israelites bring their shekels in accordance with their number "for every one that passed over to them that are counted." This giving is at the time that they donated their shekels to the *Mishkan* (*Shemot* 35) — after they achieve atonement for the Sin of the Golden Calf.

Now we come to the end of Rashi's comment, which is apparently his own novel idea:[[23]](#footnote-23)

When He was about to rest His Presenceupon them He [again] counted them. For on the first day of Nisan the tabernaclewas erected, and on the first day of Iyar He counted them.

In these brief remarks, Rashi offers a reason for the census conducted at the beginning of our *parasha*, thereby answering the question that we raised here, while also answering the question regarding the **timing** of this census: on the first of Iyar of the second year. These two questions are of course interconnected, as understood by the commentators cited above in Sections II-III.

Rashi, however, differs from all of those commentators. They connect the timing of the census to what comes **afterwards**: on the twentieth of the second month, when the journey of the Israelites began. Therefore, they see the census as a preparation for that journey, or for that which would come in the end: entry into the Land of Israel. Rashi, on the other hand, connects the census to what happens **before** it: the erection of the *Mishkan* on the first of Nisan.

Indeed, the two previous counts noted by Rashi in the wake of the Midrash are also counts that come **after** the event that necessitates them. After the Exodus from Egypt, a count is taken of the people who went out; after the plague connected to the Golden Calf, "He counted them to ascertain the number of those left."

However, with regard to the third count, Rashi's words are exceedingly difficult, crying out for explication: "When He was about (*ke-sheba*) to rest His Presence (*Shekhina)* upon them He [again] counted them." This sentence implies that the count of Israel constitutes a preparation and foundation for God's resting His *Shekhina* upon them: the phrase, "*ba* to do something," means that one is **planning** to do it. The truth, however, is that God rests His *Shekhina* upon them on the first of Nisan, when the *Mishkan* is erected, as described at the end of the Book of *Shemot* (40:34-35), whereas the count of the Israelites takes place only a month later! Rashi himself concludes his words, saying: "For on the first day of Nisan the *Mishkan* was erected, and on the first day of Iyar He counted them." The count is meant to define the people upon whom God will rest His *Shekhina* by way of the presence of the *Mishkan*; it should, therefore, be carried out before the resting of the *Shekhina*, not after it!

### VI. THe census in Chapter 1 as part of the unit dealing with the people's relationship to the *MISHKAN*

The difficulty we have raised against Rashi's explanation does not obscure its great advantage: The first four chapters of the Book of *Bamidbar* constitute a single unit, both in terms of their contents (various interconnected censuses) and from a literary perspective. What is striking is that this long literary unit revolves entirely around the *Mishkan*: everything stated therein connects one way or another to the *Mishkan*, which stands at the center of our consciousness, just as it also stands at the geographical center of the camp of Israel.

Chapter 1, precisely because it opens this lengthy unit, and it is not yet evident that the subject of this unit is the *Mishkan*, is liable to distract us from this central issue: the census is not explicitly connected to the *Mishkan*, and therefore various commentators are tempted to explain the census described therein with explanations that are not connected to the *Mishkan*.

Rashi, however, feels that this census cannot be detached from the Tabernacle: there must be a connection between the reason for the census and the fact that the *Mishkan* is dedicated shortly before. This is the subject of the opening of our book: the sanctity of the *Mishkan* and Israel's relationship toward it.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Indeed, when we reach the end of Chapter 1, the connection between the census and the *Mishkan* is revealed, but this is done by way of contrast: the reason for **omitting** the Levites among the congregation is their service in the *Mishkan*! They are in charge of the *Mishkan* and all its vessels, and they camp round about it and serve as a barrier between the *Mishkan* and the Israelites: "And the stranger that draws near shall be put to death."

Why does this role of the Levites prevent them from being counted together with the rest of the Israelites?

The Rashbam explained this (see Section III above): "Because they will not go out to war," for according to him, the census is the count of soldiers. But according to him, the main point is missing from the text: it is not because of what the Levites do that they are not counted, but rather because of what they do not do — because they do not go out to war. However, this is nowhere written in the Torah!

According to Rashi, the reason for not counting the Levites among the congregation is direct. Let us explain this: The census of the people is meant to define the population over which God comes to rest His *Shekhina* **by way of the presence of the *Mishkan*.** Rashi's words, "when He was about to rest His Presenceupon them," do not mean that the resting of God's *Shekhina* would spread out across the Israelites. On the contrary, the resting of the *Shekhina* is limited to the realm of the *Mishkan*, and the Israelites camping around it are barred from bursting forth into the Holy: "And the stranger that draws near shall be put to death."[[25]](#footnote-25)

The resting of the *Shekhina* upon Israel obligates them to conduct themselves with caution with respect to the Holy and to recognize clear boundaries between the camp of Israel and the camp of the *Shekhina.* The census itself expresses this idea, that the resting of the *Shekhina* necessitates the establishment of boundaries, not only for the *Mishkan*, but also for the people in whose midst the *Mishkan* is erected and upon whom, to a certain degree, the sanctity of the *Mishkan* even rests: who is included among the people, what is their number, and how are they divided into tribes, families and individuals (see verse 2).

In the framework of this mutual relationship between the people and the *Mishkan*, the Levites belong to the domain of the *Mishkan* rather than the domain of the people, as they are entrusted with the service of the *Mishkan*, and their camping around it is meant to divide between the people and the *Mishkan*. Seeing, therefore, that the Levites belong to the domain of the Holy, they should be counted separately and not with the congregation at large. This, indeed, is the reason for not counting the Levites in *Bamidbar Rabba* 1, 12:

"However the tribe of Levi you shall not count" (1:49).

Why were they not counted with Israel? Because the tribe of Levi were members of the palace.

This may be likened to a king who has many legions, and he says to the chief of the army: Go, count the legions, except for the legion that stands before me.

Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: "However the tribe of Levi you shall not count, neither shall you take the sum of them among the Israelites" — among the Israelites you shall not count them, but you shall count them separately, for it is not to the praise of a king, that his personal legion should be counted with the [other] legions. Therefore, Israel was counted separately, and the tribe of Levi was counted separately.

**And from where do you know that He said this to him for this reason? Since it is written afterwards: "But appoint you the Levites over the tabernacle of testimony" (v. 50).**

Rashi, as expected, adopts this explanation for not counting the Levites among the congregation as a whole:

"However, the tribe of Levi you shall not count" — It is fitting that the king's legion be counted separately.

Let us conduct a stylistic examination of the relationship between the counting of the congregation and the omission of the Levites among them: An important guideword in Chapter 1 is, as expected, the root *pei-kuf-dalet*, count or appoint.[[26]](#footnote-26)This root is found twenty-one times in the chapter, the subject of which is the census of the Israelites. Here is the distribution of this root in our chapter:

1. (v. 3) The command: “**You shall** **count** them by their hosts…”

2. (v. 19) A description of the execution: **“So did he count them** in the wilderness of Sinai.”

3-15. (vv. 20-43)Each tribe is allotted a short Masoretic section of two verses which includes the number of those counted, and concludes with the verse: "**those that were counted of them**, of the tribe of…" such-and-such. But in the passage dedicated to the tribe of Shimon the root appears twice: once in v. 22: "**those that were counted** thereof, according to the number of names;" and a second time at the end of the section (23): "**those that were counted of them,** of the tribe of Shimon…"[[27]](#footnote-27)

15-18. (vv. 44-46) The root appears three times in the summation of the census:

**“These are those that were counted**, which Moshe and Aharon **counted…”[[28]](#footnote-28)**

“And all **those that were counted** of the Israelites…”

“All **those that were counted** were…”

19-20. (vv. 47-49) The omission of the Levites:

“But the Levites after the tribe of their fathers **were not counted** among them.”

“However the tribe of Levi **you shall not count**…”[[29]](#footnote-29)

A common phenomenon regarding guidewords in *Tanakh* is that the last instance of the word in the literary unit under discussion involves some surprising element, usually a meaning that is different than that of all the previous instances.[[30]](#footnote-30)

What then is the twenty-first instance of the root *pei-kuf-dalet* in Chapter 1?

21. (50) But **appoint** (*hafked*) you Levites over the tabernacle of testimony…

The root *pei-kuf-dalet* in the *hifil* conjugation appears here in a sense different from all twenty previous appearances: not in the sense of counting, but in the sense of appointment and granting of authority.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Let us pay attention to the contrast between these two adjacent verses:

However the tribe of Levi you shall not **count** (*tifkod*)… but **appoint** (*hafked*) you the Levites over the tabernacle of testimony.

Why is the tribe of Levi not to be "counted" with the rest of the congregation? Because it must be "appointed" over the tabernacle of testimony. He who is appointed over the *Mishkan* is a member of the palace, part of the legion of the king, and is not counted with the rest of the people.

### VII. THe census as an Ongoing activity

Our clear inclination toward Rashi's explanation, whose explanation of the reason for the census in Chapter 1 appears to us the most appropriate explanation of the plain meaning of what is stated in our chapter, has not caused us to forget the difficulty with his explanation with which we concluded Section IV of this study: if the present count of Israel is connected to the fact that God is about to rest His *Shekhina* upon Israel by way of the *Mishkan*, why is it conducted a month after the erection of the *Mishkan*, and not before it is set up?

This question does, indeed, pose a difficulty for Rashi, according to whom two censuses are conducted about a half a year apart from each other. The earlier census is conducted when they begin to prepare for the building of the *Mishkan*, when donations are collected from the people (which according to *Chazal* is after Yom Kippur of the first year). Then the people are counted by way of the half-shekels, which Moshe is commanded to collect in *Shemot* 30:11-16. The reason for this count, according to Rashi, as we wrote above, lies in its (relative) proximity to the Sin of the Golden Calf and its ramifications, "to ascertain the number of those left."

About six months later, on the first day of the second month of the second year, Moshe is commanded to count the people a second time, and this time, Rashi says, the reason for the census is the resting of the *Shekhina* upon Israel by way of the *Mishkan* that is erected a month prior to that census.

In our study of *Parashat Bamidbar* (first series), we dealt with the question that many commentators struggle with, including Rashi himself (in his commentary to *Shemot* 30:15-16):

If you ask, however: Is it at all possible that on both [of these occasions] the number of Israelites was [exactly] the same, viz. 603, 550, for in the count of [how] the silver of those that were counted of the congregation [was used] (38:27) it is so stated, and in the Book of *Bamidbar* (1:46) [exactly] the same is stated… Were not [those censuses taken] in two [different] years, and surely it is impossible that there were not at the time of the first census people nineteen years old who were not counted, and who became twenty years old in the second year!

In that article, we reviewed the various answers offered by the commentators to this serious question, finding them to be most difficult, except for the answer proposed by Cassuto, which assumes that we are dealing with the same census, which **begins** in the first year after the Exodus from Egypt and ends in the second month of the second year. (We cited his words also in our article on *Parashat Ki Tisa* this year):

At the same time that the artisans were busy with the work of the tabernacle, the first steps of the census were taken: the Israelites stood one by one before the appointed officials, who recorded their names on potsherds and received from each of them silver in the weight of a half-shekel, and this money was used for the work of the tabernacle, for the fashioning of the sockets.

After all the steps for recording the Israelites were taken, and after the month of Nisan passed, the month dedicated to the holiday of the erection of the tabernacleand the holiday of Pesach, they began on the first day of the second month of the second year those steps of sorting and examining the potsherds and making calculations on the part of those who were entrusted with those steps, the princes of the congregation… And these steps were carried out, as it is explicitly written "according to the number of names" — that is to say, by counting the names recorded on the potsherds.

Even though several months had passed since the beginning of the census, the total number rising from the census counts is exactly the same at the number of half-shekels that were given in the first year, because the counts were based on the potsherds on which the names were written when the people gave their half-shekels.

Rashi, then, is right: "When He was about to rest His *Shekhina* upon them, He counted them"[[32]](#footnote-32) — but not as he intended, but as becomes clear now based on the explanation given by Cassuto: when God is about to rest His *Shekhina* upon Israel, and when He commands them to build the tabernaclefor that purpose, He counts them by way of the half-shekels. This count is even given to us when the donations given to the Tabernacleare tallied (*Shemot* 38:21-31), and we are told what was done with the half-shekels used in the census:

*Shemot* 38:25: And the silver of them that were counted of the congregation was a hundred talents, and a thousand seven hundred and three-score and fifteen shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary:

26: A *beka* a head, that is, half a shekel, after the shekel of the sanctuary, for every one that passed over to them that are counted, from twenty years old and upward, **for six hundred thousand and three thousand and five hundred and fifty men.**

27 And the hundred talents of silver were for casting the sockets of the sanctuary, and the sockets of the veil: a hundred sockets for the hundred talents, a talent for a socket.[[33]](#footnote-33)

This count itself is what is given to us a second time upon completion of the procedures of this census in the second month of the second year. Now it is given in a more elaborate form: not only the general sum of the congregation, which we already know, but also the count of each and every tribe. Even that which is not spelled out in the Torah is known to the census-takers at that time — the count of each family and each father's house, and the family affiliation of each individual.[[34]](#footnote-34) However, all of this information, concerning the people upon whom God rests His *Shekhina*, has long been gathered, even before the *Mishkan* is erected, and exists in potential on the potsherds which have been collected together with the half-shekels. It is its publication that takes place in the second month,[[35]](#footnote-35) and this involves a certain festive proclamation: this is the people, this is the populace upon whom God has rested His *Shekhina* by way of the erection of the *Mishkan* a month earlier.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. *Bamidbar Rabba* (2, 19) senses the great redundancy in Chapters 1-2, and resolves it in a Midrashic manner. The words of the Midrash will be brought in Section V below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See: *Yehoshua* 8:10; *Shofetim* 7:3; I *Shemuel* 11:8; ibid. 15:4; II *Shemuel* 18:1; I *Melakhim* 20:15; ibid. 20:26; II *Melakhim* 3:6; II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 25:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This seems to be the age of those who go out to war; see I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 25:5. Chizkuni, in his commentary to v. 3, s.v. *Mi-ben esrim shana va-mala*, writes: "For at that time, they are fit to go out to war. And from here our Rabbis said: ‘At age twenty – to pursue’ (*Avot* 5:21).” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Here the Ramban wants to answer the following question: why should we care about the number of each tribe, if the goal of the census is to measure the size of the army which is about to fight. His answer is that there are some military missions which would be given to one tribe or a number of tribes, and thus the number of combatants in each tribe is vital information.

   Arvot Moav is mentioned here, as well as “For now they were ready to enter the land and to wage war against the Amorite kings on the other side of the Jordan and all the rest of them” above, but it is not clear why. After all, the anticipated war, were it not for the Sin of the Spies, would occur in the southern part of Eretz Isrel, not in Arvot Moav on the other (eastern) side of the Jordan, controlled by the Amorite kings Sichon and Og. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Based on *Devarim* 32:30. This principle, that the Torah does not expect man to rely on miracles, but rather it commands man to act in accordance with the customary way of the world (even when a miracle will be performed), is mentioned by the Ramban in several places in his commentary to the Torah. See his commentary to *Bamidbar* 13:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Y. Licht, in his commentary to the book of *Bamidbar*, and so too M. Weinfeld, in *Olam Ha-Tanakh* to *Bamidbar*, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The tribal princes are mentioned here as standing together with Moshe and Aharon at the time of the census, but not in any military context. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A clue to the danger of war along the way is found in the verse: "And it came to pass, when the ark journeyed…" (10:35). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. What we have written here is based on our analysis of the Sin of the Spies, as explained in the article on *Parashat Shelach,* in the first series. However, the Ramban, in his commentary on *Bamidbar* 13, sees the sending of the Spies as a military preparation for the conquest of Eretz Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This exact phrasing does not appear in the Torah, but in Chapter 4 below we do find similar terminology: “whoever comes to the host to perform labor in the tent of meeting” (3), “to join the host, to do the work in the tent of meeting” (24). See also vv. 30, 35, 39, 43. See also 8:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The term *tzava* may denote something else also: a set time of service, as well as the term of a hired employee for a number of years (*“Tzava,” Ben-Yehuda Dictionary*, p. 5353). Some of the verses in Chapter 4 may be explained with this definition, as well as a number of verses in the Book of *Iyov* (7:1, 10:17, 14:14). Tur-Sinai notes (*Ben-Yehuda Dictionary* ibid. n. 2) that “this may perhaps be the original meaning of the root, from which all other meanings sprouted.” He muses: “In fact, we may use this to explain even the usual meaning of *tzava* and *tzevaot*, in the sense of a hired *tzava*, people being hired for the *tzava*.” He maintains this because “it is difficult to to explain this definition [of being hired] as emerging from the definition of army and war.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rav Ovadya Seforno in his commentary to v. 45, and so too other commentators, note that they did not count "one who was over sixty, as he did not go out to war." [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Aside from here, Seforno states this in his commentary in the following places: *Bamidbar* 9:1, 10:35; *Devarim* 1:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. He means by this that some of the Canaanite nations did indeed flee after the Israelites sin and wander for forty years. Seforno is referring to *JT Shevi’it* 6:1 (cf. *Vayikra Rabba* 17:6), which states that the Girgashites took Yehoshua up on his offer and fled to Phrygia. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This idea is repeated in different formulations in various places in the Midrash. The Ramban's wording seems to be taken from Rashi's commentary, which will be discussed in the next section. There we will examine Rashi's sources in the Midrash. We should note that according to *Chazal*, the reason for constantly counting the Jewish people is God’s affection for His nation, while the Ramban maintains that the reason is God’s will to educate them and let them know His lovingkindness towards them. See infra fn. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. He seems to mean that the merits of community will stand for the individual who is counted among them. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Up until this point, the Ramban speaks of the merit enjoyed by the individual who is counted by Moshe and Aharon and included in the number of all of the Israelites. Starting with this sentence, he discusses the merit enjoyed by the community that is counted by Moshe and Aharon. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Literally, "all the time." It is difficult to accept the assertion that God counts Israel "all the time." The Torah describes with certainty only two censuses that are separated by thirty-eight years, and one questionable census (at the end of the Book of *Shemot*; we will return to consider whether this is a separate census at the end of this article). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I heard this from Prof. Yonah Frankel, but I do not remember whether he offered this as his own insight or whether he reported this in the name of someone else. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This *midrash* has parallels in *Tanchuma Ki Tisa* 9 and *Tanchuma* (Buber) *Ki Tisa* 8 and *Pesikta Rabbati* 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The other five censuses are two in the time of Shaul (“And he counted them at Tela’im” *[I Shemuel* 15:4], “And he counted them in Bezek” [ibid. 11:8]); one in the time of David (*II Shemuel* 24), one in the time of Ezra (“All the assembly together was forty thousand,” *Ezra* 2:64); and one in the future (“Until the sheep shall pass by the hand of the one who counts,” *Yirmeyahu* 33:13).

    This *midrash* belongs to the group of *midrashim* which describe world events in terms of a series of ten throughout history, with the final one being in the future. Compare this to the ten songs described in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Shira.* [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This sentence is taken from the previous *midrash*, with some alteration, and Rashi connects the two *midrashim*, seeing one as explaining the other. However, if the first *midrash* is taken on its own, it is clear that it expresses a different idea than that offered by Rashi (and the Ramban): this *midrash* does not relate to the many and sundry censuses carried out, but the rather frequent repetition of the numbers of the Israelties, of each tribe on its own and of the nation as a whole, in Chapters 1-2 of our book. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The Midrash notes the census at the beginning our book as the fourth count of Israel, but it refers to it as "in the banners," whereas Rashi offers his own explanation of the census. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Even ibn Ezra notes this, and thus he explains the aim of the census as “to establish the banners, and how they will journey and how they will camp **as the sanctuary moves**.” We already discussed the difficulties with his explanation in Section II above. Rashi seeks a link between the *Mishkan* and the census in Chapter 1 in its own right, without any connection to the banners in Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This is, of course, the plain sense of the verse (*Shemot* 25:8): "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" — by dwelling in the sanctuary that they make for Me, I will dwell among them. Compare this verse to the concluding verses of the command to build the *Mishkan*, *Shemot* 29:43-46. There is a famous “*derasha,*" as it were:

    This is the matter of “That I may dwell in their midst” — for it does not say “in its midst,” but rather “in their midst.” This is to say that they themselves will be the residence (*mishkan)* and domicile for the Shekhina, for “they are the palace of the Lord” (*Yirmeyahu* 7:7). (Rav Moshe Alshikh, *Torat Moshe, Parashat Beshalach)*

    This is not found in the words of *Chazal*, but rather in the words of medieval and later commentators. This "*derasha*," which has a moral message, removes the verse from its plain meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This root appears as a guideword also in the census conducted in Arvot Moav in Chapter 26. See our discussion in our study of *Parashat Pinchas*, second series, Section VI, pp. 295-296. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. So too in Chapter 26 the root *pei-kuf-dalet* appears one time in the count of each tribe, **except for the tribe of Shimon where it does not appear at all** (see the article cited in the previous note, in note 29 there). This omission in Chapter 26 is deliberate, and I have no doubt that the tribe of Shimon receives its compensation in our chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. We count the two instances in v. 44 as one. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. In Chapter 26, after giving the count of every tribe, the count of the Levites is given as well (there too they are counted separately) at the end of the chapter, leading to three more appearances of the guideword, but its appearance there is in a positive sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. This is also the case in Chapter 26, when we add to it Moshe's request (27:16): "Let the Lord… appoint (*yifkod*)a man over the congregation." See our comments in the article cited above in note 27. Additional examples may be found in our study of *Parashat Vayakhel* in the first series, fn. 12, all of them from the beginning of that *parasha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This is also the case in Chapter 26 in the twenty-first instance of the root, after twenty previous appearances. See what we wrote there (p. 296) regarding the connection between these two meanings of the root *pei-kuf-dalet.* [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. However, he is not correct when it comes to the next line, where he writes: "On the first day of Nisan the tabernaclewas erected, and on the first day of Iyar He counted them." True, on the first day of Iyar the counting project comes to an end, but it starts long before that point, before the *Mishkan* is erected on the first of Nisan. See infra n. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. How symbolic it is that the count of Israel by way of the half-shekels, **conducted in anticipation of the resting of the *Shekhina* upon them with the establishment of the *Mishkan*,** is then used for the casting of the sockets of the *Mishkan*! The *Mishkan*, as it were, stands on the base of the counted congregation of Israel: Israel serves as the chariot of the *Shekhina.* [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Moshe is commanded to clarify all these matters in verse 2: "by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, by their polls."  [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. According to our proposal at the end of the previously cited article, the sorting of the material on the potsherds begins as soon as they are received and continues parallel to the building of the *Mishkan* (against what Cassuto writes). The festive publication of the results of the census is what takes place on the first day of the second month. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)