

The Hebrew name for our parashah as well as for the entire book whose English name is Numbers, is *Bamidbar*, which means in the wilderness. Since leaving Egypt and crossing the Sea of Reeds, the Israelites have been in the wilderness, literally as well as figuratively. We know that their journey will be long and arduous, and that with only two exceptions, no one in the original group will enter the Promised Land. Physically, the people are free, but after generations of slavery they have no idea how to function as free people. How could they, when their very identity has been suppressed for so long and the way forward is unclear? We find them just starting to get organized. To this end, no fewer than five censuses are taken: families, to determine the number of men 20 and older in each tribe in order to form an army; legions and encampments with their accompanying banners, to determine the order in which they travel; Levites from the age of one month to assign duties concerning the holy objects; firstborn Israelites aged one month and upward for redemption; and sons of Kohath between age 30 and 50 for work with the *mishkan*. The census-taking spills over into the beginning of the next parashah, and near the end of Numbers, there is yet another census. No wonder Mishnah Yoma 7 calls this book *chumash hap'kudim*, the Book of Countings. Underlying all of this is the practice of precise enumeration, a technique that evolved as cities developed, most likely about 4000 BCE in Sumeria. Counting and sorting are among the first basic skills a child learns. But how we count and sort depends on our value system, especially in regard to how we treat individuals. Statistics serve a multitude of important functions, but they are only a tool, for good or evil, in the hands of those who employ it. The descendants of Jakob's progeny migrated to Egypt and multiplied into the "swarm" (Exodus 1:7) that became Pharaoh's nameless, faceless slaves, who now must reclaim their identity and learn how to fit into a society where everyone counts because each individual has a responsibility. Totalitarian regimes see people as mere numbers, as groups consisting of interchangeable entities to be arbitrarily used or discarded. So do racial and religious supremacists and terrorists of all stripes, such as the two 18-year-old mass shooters in the USA, who in two separate incidents recently killed a total of 31 innocent people. What totalitarian systems, supremacists, terrorists, and random killers all have in common is the dehumanization of their fellow human beings. For the Israelites in the wilderness, this was the prevailing condition. Today's king could easily become tomorrow's slave, and yes, our Israelite ancestors also engaged in these practices, as we will read at the end of this book. We are not immune to human foibles, among which is the pernicious tendency to disregard the humanity of people who are different from us. Perhaps the reason the Torah forbids counting Jews directly stems from this propensity. HaShem orders several censuses, but each of them has a specific purpose, and the act of census taking is usually referred to in euphemisms such as lift the head, by their legions, or by their families; i.e., tribes, tribal leaders, families, and individuals are named and assigned specific territories and duties. Although this made our ancestors unique in their world, they still shared one similarity that stubbornly persists in many cultures today: Only the males were counted. Why did they ignore the female population? Citing Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah II.19, Rashi teaches that HaShem ordered so many censuses out of love, like "a man who has all his favorite treasures in a beautiful box. He loves them so much that he opens the box repeatedly just to take out his treasures, examine them, and count them again and again to make sure they are all there. So does the Eternal count and recount those that are dear and treasured." Were the women not equally dear and treasured, or are they only nameless, faceless numbers? Grappling with this question, the Kabbalists explain that the male creation force is outward and visible, while the female creation force is inward and secluded. Men's contribution to holiness is to go out into the world and wage war against injustice, while women's contribution is to protect, nurture, and teach in order to reveal the holiness in all of creation. We have come far enough to respectfully disagree with their premise and still uphold the ideals of holiness it contains. Regardless of gender, race, or any other particularity, every human being counts. That is why census taking remains a paradox for us Jews. On the one hand, it provides valuable statistics for a variety of purposes from age related needs like schools and elderly care facilities to infrastructure requirements and political representation. On the other hand, it reduces individuals to numbers. Squaring that circle has always been challenging. Judaism teaches that the adage "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" is valid only when each part is valued for its unique contribution. No two human beings are alike, but we all are fashioned "in the image of HaShem," and we all count. We are about to arrive at the end of our journey from Pesach to Shavuot. Those who count the Omer using the kabbalistic *sephiroth* know that each day stands in special relationship to the week in which it falls, and each week is a unique part of the entire process. Because no two days are alike, each one offers us a new way to see ourselves and the world, and to act accordingly to the best of our unique abilities.

Shabbat shalom and chag sameach!