

While the name of our parashah refers to the ongoing census of the Levite families, in essence it discusses the many aspects of lifting, carrying and euphemistically, counting. The root נשא forms a diverse set of words for carrying/bearing (literally and figuratively), bringing/taking, delivering (a speech/prayer), suffering/tolerating, marrying, raising/lifting up, carrying away, lofty/exalted, moving/portable, chieftain/prince, tribute, utterance, oracle, and uprising. In all its permutations it takes up nearly 5 pages in my dictionary of biblical Hebrew. Parashah Naso opens with the census and deployment of the descendants of Gershon and Merari. “Take a census (*naso et rosh* – literally, lift the head) of the sons of Gershon ...” (4:21) In last week’s parashah men aged 20 and above, except for the Levites, are counted and organized into legions. Counted separately because of their special status, the Levites support the priests, the subgroup of Levites descended from Aaron, and in addition to making music, their duties indeed run the gamut of lifting and carrying. During the 40-year trek through the desert the Levites were responsible for transporting the *mishkan* and all its furnishings. Each family, arranged in concentric rings around the *mishkan*, had its own specific tasks. As we read last week, the Kehathites, Aaron’s closest relatives, formed the innermost circle; they served in the holy interior of the *mishkan*, taking care of its most sacred furnishings and carrying them when they traveled. The Gershonites, who formed the next ring, carried the curtains and coverings of the *mishkan* and the Tent of Meeting, along with the screen that was placed in front of the entrance. The Merariites made up the outermost ring, carrying the structural components of the *mishkan*, the supporting elements of the courtyard, and the implements used there. It is noteworthy that while both of these clans carried their burdens on ox carts, the Kehathites carried theirs on staves close to their bodies as befitting the holiest objects. The priests presided over the offerings and blessed the people. However, unlike the pagan shamans such as Bil’am, who had the power to bless and curse, no human being in our tradition has the authority to directly bless the people. No matter our status or heritage, we all are simply emissaries, conduits for transmitting HaShem’s blessings. In Parashah Shemini, Aaron raises his hands to bless the people after performing the offerings culminating the week of inauguration (Leviticus 9:22). Now, HaShem tells Moses to teach the priests the words to use for this purpose. We know them well: “May the Lord bless you and watch over you. May the Lord cause His countenance to shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord raise (*yisah*) His countenance toward you and grant you peace.” (6:24-26) Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom calls this progression of 3 words in the first verse, 5 in the second, and 7 in the third, a “rising crescendo,” which Midrash Tanchuma Naso 10 also notices: “‘The Lord make His face shine,’ and raise up children from you to be Torah scholars. ... ‘The Lord make his face shine,’ to raise up priests from you, who kindle fire ... ‘and be gracious to you,’ to raise up prophets from you. ... When they [the people] lift up their faces [show favor, i.e., be grateful] to Me, so do I lift up My face to them.” Other variations of the root נשא include the *sotah*, the woman convicted of adultery, who “shall bear her iniquity (*tisa et-avonah*),” (5:31) and the tribal chieftains (*nesi’ey – nasi* means prince or chieftain), who each bring their offerings. The account of these offerings, largely identical despite a few small differences, underscores the principle of “raising the head” as opposed to simply numbering. Each chieftain and each tribe is acknowledged separately, not as mere cogs in a huge, impersonal machine, but rather, as valued individual members who together form a greater whole. Amongst and within the tribes the potential for envy was enormous. Assigning individual duties for service in the *mishkan* and honoring each tribe and its gifts individually helped to curb the inevitable resentment that besets us humans when we feel we are not being duly acknowledged. Back in Parashah Ki Tisa (literally, when you raise) a census is taken by means of the half-shekel donation levied on every male for the maintenance of the *mishkan*. After the destruction of the Temple the days of the Omer Count received a special identity. Unable to count off the days with a sheaf of barley, the wise Kabbalists ascribed one of the seven lower *sephirot* to each of the seven weeks and each day of every week, creating 49 individual days through which we can learn each year anew how best to define and channel our own strengths and weaknesses. Now it is easy to understand why the Torah refers to census taking as “raising the head.” We are never just numbers. We are human beings, defined by all the impulses and experiences that radiate outward from us to the farthest reaches of our consciousness and back to us imbued with all they contain. Three months after celebrating our freedom from Egyptian slavery, we stand at Sinai ready to receive our Torah. Thanks to the extra month of Adar in this leap year, we are a year and a month older than we were at this juncture last year. Shavuot always falls between the first two Torah portions of the Book of Numbers, where the Israelites are being counted and informed of how they will contribute to their nascent society. If we have been counting the Omer every day guided by the characteristics of the *sephirot*, we too, have been on a journey. Although not as overwhelming as that of our ancestors, it may have given us new insight and new impulses for using our unique talents and perspectives to help heal our fractured world. We all count, so let’s lift our heads and our hearts and get to work!