

OVERWHELMING NUMBERS AND WHAT TO DO WITH THEM

A commentary on *Parashat Bamidbar*
By Dr Edie Friedman

The reading of *Bamidbar* marks the start of what is known in English as ‘the Book of Numbers’. It does not disappoint. In it we read about 4 camps, 12 tribes, 273 surplus firstborn, 22,300 Levites, 603,550 Israelites and so on. These numbers can seem overwhelming, but what can we learn from them?

The *Parasha* starts by saying that G-d decreed that the Israelites should be counted – what would be called conducting a census. They were counted when they left Egypt and were counted again after many had died following the worshipping of the golden calf. They were then counted a third time as the people entered the longest and most demanding stage of their journey. We know that biblical texts can be read in a manner which strengthens our own individual beliefs. Is this *Parasha* about a mere mechanical process or as the commentator Rashi suggests, a manifestation of G-d’s love for his people, in that every individual counts? The place of numbers in this *Parasha* can make the text seem obscure, dense and bewildering. Some commentators have suggested that in spite of this, the text can be read as a reminder of the mixed blessing of using numbers in helping us understand difficult issues in the world. On the one hand, numbers serve an important function in simply providing

us with basic information, yet on the other hand, numbers can also overwhelm us, making us feel powerless and useless in the face of huge and grave problems. Numbers can also serve to dehumanise the very people with whom we want people to identify. How many times have we heard people comment that it

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is easier to empathise with one individual than with a group?

The Israelites are, in *Parashat Bamidbar*, for all intents and purposes, refugees. They escaped from persecution in Egypt and are travelling – for more than 40 years – through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

So what are we to make of this portion in relation to our understanding of and interest in refugees today?

Numbers or statistics documenting the ‘refugee crisis’ make for very grim reading indeed. In 2016 alone,

- 4.8 million refugees were displaced from Syria
- 4271 refugees drowned in the Mediterranean
- 10,000 out of 90,000 child refugees who reached Europe, disappeared
- Out of the 20,000 Syrian refugees due to arrive in the UK by 2020, only 2,700 had actually arrived
- The Government promised to take in an unspecified number of vulnerable refugee children.

These statistics are important for us in that they not only serve as a reminder of the magnitude of today’s refugee crisis, but also as a reminder that each statistic represents a human life.

One of the challenges we face in encouraging people not to be overcome by compassion fatigue, is to hold two contradictory thoughts together at the same time; the scale of the problem may be enormous but we must not lose sight of the fact that in the midst of all

these numbers they are human beings. The act of helping one individual must never be underestimated. As it says in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin 37a*), “when you save one life it is as if you saved the entire world”. But action to help the individual should go hand in hand with action to deal with the underlying causes of the problem- a difficult task, but one we cannot ignore.