

# COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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## Leading a Nation of Individuals

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The book of Bamidbar begins with a census of the Israelites. That is why it is known in English as *Numbers*. What is the significance of this act of counting?

And why here at the beginning of the book? Besides which, there have already been two previous censuses of the people and this is the third within the space of a single year. Surely one would have been sufficient. And does counting have anything to do with leadership?

**“What is the significance of this act of counting? And does counting have anything to do with leadership?”**

The place to begin is to note what looks like a contradiction.

On the one hand Rashi says that the acts of counting in the torah are gestures of love on the part of God:

Because they (the children of Israel) are dear to Him, G-d counts them often. He counted them when they were about to leave Egypt. He counted them after the Golden Calf to establish how many were left. And now that He was about to cause His presence to rest on them (with the inauguration of the sanctuary), He counted them again. (Rashi to Bamidbar 1:1)

When God initiates a census of the Israelites it is to show that He loves them.

On the other hand the Torah is explicit in saying that taking a census of the nation is fraught with risk:

Then G-d said to Moses, “When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each must give to G-d a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them. (Ex. 30: 11-12).

When, centuries later, King David counted the people, there was Divine anger and 70,000 people died.<sup>1</sup> How can this be if counting is an expression of love?

The answer lies in the phrase the Torah uses to describe the act of counting: *se'u et rosh*, literally, “lift the head.” This is a strange, circumlocutory expression. Biblical Hebrew contains many verbs meaning “to count”: *limnot*, *lifkod*, *lispur*, *lachshov*. Why does the Torah not use these simple words, choosing instead the roundabout expression, “lift the heads” of the people?

The short answer is this. In any census, count or roll-call there is a tendency to focus on the total: the crowd, the multitude, the mass. Here is a nation of 60 million people, or a company with 100,000 employees or a sports crowd of 60,000. Any total tends to value the group or nation as a whole. The larger the total, the stronger is the army, the more popular the team, and the more successful the company.

Counting devalues the individual, and tends to make him or her replaceable. If one soldier dies in battle, another will take his place. If one person leaves the organisation, someone else can be hired to do his or her job.

Notoriously, too, crowds have the effect of tending to make the individual lose his or her independent judgment and follow what others are doing. We call this “herd behaviour,” and it sometimes leads to collective madness. In 1841 Charles Mackay published his classic study, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions And The Madness Of Crowds*, which tells of the South Sea Bubble that cost thousands their money in the 1720s, and the tulip mania in Holland when fortunes were spent on single tulip bulbs. The Great Crashes of 1929 and 2008 had the same crowd psychology.

Another great work, Gustav Le Bon’s *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895) showed how crowds exercise a “magnetic influence” that transmutes the behaviour of individuals into a collective “group mind.” As he put it, “An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will.” People in a crowd become anonymous. Their conscience is silenced. They lose a sense of personal responsibility. Crowds are peculiarly prone to regressive behaviour, primitive reactions and instinctual behaviour. They are easily led by figures who are demagogues, playing on people’s fears and sense of victimhood. Such leaders, he said, are “especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous excitable half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness,”<sup>2</sup> a remarkable anticipation of Hitler. It is no accident that Le Bon’s work was published in France at a time of rising antisemitism and the Dreyfus trial.

**“Even in a massive crowd where, to human eyes, faces blur into a mass, God still relates to us as individuals, not as members of a crowd.”**

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21.

<sup>2</sup> Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd*, London, Fisher Unwin 1896, 134.

Hence the significance of one remarkable feature of Judaism: its principled insistence – like no other civilization before – on the dignity and integrity of the individual. We believe that every human being is in the image and likeness of God. The sages said that every life is like an entire universe.<sup>3</sup> Maimonides says that each of us should see ourselves as if our next act could change the fate of the world.<sup>4</sup> Every dissenting view is carefully recorded in the Mishnah, even if the law is otherwise. Every verse of the Torah is capable, said the sages, of seventy interpretations. No voice, no view, is silenced. Judaism never allows us to lose our individuality in the mass.

There is a wonderful blessing mentioned in the Talmud to be said on seeing 600,000 Israelites together in one place. It is: “Blessed are You, Lord ... who discerns secrets.”<sup>5</sup> The Talmud explains that every person is different. We each have different attributes. We all think our own thoughts. Only God can enter the minds of each of us and know what we are thinking, and this is what the blessing refers to. In other words, even in a massive crowd where, to human eyes, faces blur into a mass, God still relates to us as individuals, not as members of a crowd.

That is the meaning of the phrase, “lift the head,” used in the context of a census. God tells Moses that there is a danger, when counting a nation, that each individual will feel insignificant. “What am I? What difference can I make? I am only one of millions, a mere wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the sea-shore, dust on the surface of infinity.”

**“Judaism has a profound mistrust of demagogic leaders who manipulate the emotions of crowds.”**

Against that, God tells Moses to lift people’s heads by showing that they each count; they matter as individuals. Indeed in Jewish law a *davar she-be-minyan*, something that is counted, sold individually rather than by weight, is never nullified even in a mixture of a thousand or a million others.<sup>6</sup> In Judaism taking a census must always be done in such a way as to signal that we are valued as individuals. We each have unique gifts. There is a contribution only I can bring. To lift someone’s head means to show them favour, to recognise them. It is a gesture of love.

There is, however, all the difference in the world between *individuality* and *individualism*. Individuality means that I am a unique and valued member of a team. Individualism means that I am not a team player at all. I am interested in myself alone, not the group. Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam gave this a famous name, noting that more people than ever in the United States are going ten-pin bowling but fewer than ever are

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<sup>3</sup> Mishnah Sanhedrin 4: 4.

<sup>4</sup> Maimonides, Hilkhhot Teshuvah 3: 4.

<sup>5</sup> Berakhot 58a.

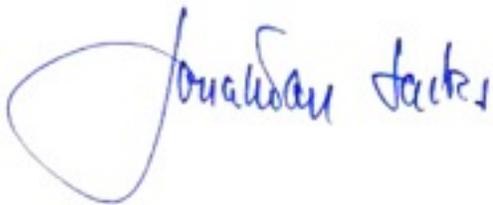
<sup>6</sup> Betsah 3b.

joining teams. He called it “Bowling alone.”<sup>7</sup> MIT professor Sherry Turkle calls our age of Twitter, Facebook, and electronic rather than face-to-face friendships, “Alone together.”<sup>8</sup> Judaism values individuality, not individualism. As Hillel said, “If I am only for myself, what am I?”<sup>9</sup>

All this has implications for Jewish leadership. We are not in the business of counting numbers. The Jewish people always was small and yet achieved great things. Judaism has a profound mistrust of demagogic leaders who manipulate the emotions of crowds. Moses at the burning bush spoke of his inability to be eloquent. “I am not a man of words.” He thought this was a failing in a leader. In fact it was the opposite. Moses did not sway people by his oratory. Rather, he lifted them by his teaching.

A Jewish leader has to respect individuals. He or she must “lift their heads.” However large the group you lead, you must always communicate the value you place on everyone, including those others exclude: the widow, the orphan and the stranger. You must never attempt to sway a crowd by appealing to the primitive emotions of fear or hate. You must never ride roughshod over the opinions of others.

It is hard to lead a nation of individuals, but this is the most challenging, empowering, inspiring leadership of all.



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<sup>7</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone together : why we expect more from technology and less from each other*, New York, Basic Books, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Mishnah Avot 1: 14.