



The Shepherd's Census

Sicha Summary

Chelek 18 | Pinchas | Sichah 1

The Verse:

When the Jewish men engaged in illicit relationships with Moabite women, and then worshipped their god, Baal-peor, G-d sent a plague that killed 24,000 people. (*Bamidbar 25:3-8*)

The Torah then relates, “It was after the plague that G-d spoke to Moses and to Elazar the son of Aaron the *kohen*, saying: Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel from twenty years old and upwards....” (*Bamidbar 26:1-2*)

The Rashi:

It was after the plague — This can be compared to wolves who encroached upon a shepherd’s flock and killed some of his sheep. The shepherd counted his sheep to know how many were left. Another interpretation: When they left Egypt and were entrusted to Moses, they were delivered to him with a census. Now that he was close to death and would soon have to return his flock, he returned them with a census. (*Midrash Tanchuma Pinchas 4, Bamidbar Rabbah 21:7*)

The Questions:

Earlier in his commentary, Rashi twice explained G-d's reason for taking a census of the Jewish people. In his comment on the opening verse of *Bamidbar*, Rashi writes, "Because they were dear to Him, He counted them often."

Regarding the census taken in the aftermath of the plague that followed the sin of the Golden Calf, Rashi comments: "This can be compared to a flock of sheep, treasured by its owner, that was stricken with pestilence. When the pestilence was over, the owner said to the shepherd, "Please count my sheep to know how many are left," in order to make it known that he treasured the flock. (*Shemos* 30:16)

With this information, we can ask the following:

- 1) Why must Rashi explain the reason for a census again?
- 2) How does the parable of the shepherd add insight to his explanation?
It would have been sufficient for Rashi to simply say that "Moses, a devoted leader, counted the survivors to know how many people remained under his care."
- 3) Why does Rashi need to advance a second explanation?
- 4) Why, in *Shemos*, does Rashi say that the "owner" of the sheep initiates the census, while here, the "shepherd" initiates the counting?
- 5) Similarly, in *Shemos*, why was it "pestilence" that killed the sheep, while here it was "wolves"?

The Explanation:

The punishment that followed the illicit relationships and idol worship took two forms: a) a plague that killed 24,000 people; and b) the judges of Israel sentenced to death and killed 176,000 people. (*Bamidbar* 25:5 and *Rashi* there).

If so, why was the census taken specifically because of the “plague” and not because of the much larger tragedy, the loss of 176,000 Jews?

To answer this, Rashi introduces the **shepherd’s** census. An owner and a shepherd conduct a census for different reasons. The owner counts his surviving sheep to express his love for them. It does not matter how the sheep were killed or whose fault it was, all that matters is that he knows how many sheep remain complete and healthy.

Conversely, when a shepherd takes a census, he is preoccupied with how he is going to be a more effective shepherd and prevent any harm from visiting his sheep again. A shepherd, it follows, will only take a census when he feels responsible for what happened. Chagrined at his lapse of care, he will zealously count the remaining sheep to ensure it never happens again.

There is little a shepherd can do to prevent pestilence in his flock. But protecting the flock from predators is his primary responsibility.

The court-ordered executions of the 176,000 was not something Moses could prevent. Law is decided by the court. But while the plague raged amongst the Jewish people, Zimri challenged Moses over the law prohibiting cohabitation with a non-Jew, and the law eluded Moses. Only when Pinchas heroically killed Zimri did the plague cease. Moses, therefore, felt partly responsible for the plague.

This, Rashi explains, is why Moses counted the Jews after the “plague.” The **shepherd** counts his sheep when they are **killed by wolves** and he feels responsible.

After the incident of the Golden Calf, however, it was the “owner,” G-d, who counted them, because Moses, the “shepherd”, was on the mountain during this episode, and bore no responsibility.

Rashi’s Second Explanation:

This incident took place close to Moses' death. If he was going to count the remaining Jews to ensure their improved protection, shouldn't their future leader, Joshua, take part in the census as well? Because of this difficulty, Rashi provides a second explanation that links the census with Moses' death. This interpretation is weaker than the first, however, because it does not explain why the census was taken "after the plague."

The Final Question:

Why indeed did G-d not count the remaining Jews to show His love for them as He did after the incident of the Golden Calf?

The prohibition of cohabiting with a non-Jewish woman is particularly severe because the child born of such a union is not part of the Jewish people. In a sense, the sinner, too, is separated from his people. Thus, Rashi says, "The G-d of these people hates immorality." (*Bamidbar* 24:14) G-d, therefore, did not cherish those who cohabited with the Moabites, and He did not consider the survivors to be "left over" from the victims of the plague — because the victims had abandoned the Jewish people through their relationships.

The Lesson:

Moses, however, did consider himself responsible for those Jews who sinned with the Moabites. He took a census "to know how many remained" — he saw the survivors and the sinners as part of one flock, his flock. Once Moses displayed this compassion for every Jew, it became enshrined as part of Torah itself.