

**Shabbat Shalom
from Rabbi Michael Gold**

Candle Lighting Time
Fri. 7:43 pm

Services

Sat. May 16 9:30 am Shabbat Morning Service

Shavuot Services (The festival begins Thursday night May 21)

Fri. May 22 9:30 am First Day Shavuot (reading of Ten Commandments)

6 pm Evening Service followed by Dairy dinner for those with reservations

Sat. May 23 9:30 am Second Day Shavuot (reading of Book of Ruth), Yizkor

Shavuot is coming in a week, the day that we celebrate the giving of the Torah. It was given in the wilderness to teach that its wisdom is available to all people. In a world of war and hatred, may the words of the Torah to seek peace and love the stranger be spread throughout the world.

Here is my message for this week.

PARSHAT BEMIDBAR

TAKING A CENSUS

“Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, by families, by the house of their fathers, according to the number of names, every male by their polls.” (Numbers 1:2)

I recently spoke with a friend who is a Chabad rabbi, who just celebrated the birth of his umpteenth grandchild. I asked him how many grandchildren he has. He answered, “I don’t know. I never count.” He was trying to teach me a profound lesson about my own tradition. Judaism forbids counting of people.

If I want to know whether we have a minyan for services, the ten Jews needed for our most important prayers, I never count. I say a verse in Hebrew from the book of Psalms. If there is a person for each word of the verse, we have a minyan. When I used to run my minyan on Zoom during Covid, the software counted for me. But in keeping with my tradition, I tried to ignore the count.

One of the college classes I have taught is Introduction to Religion. I make each of my students write me a five-page paper. One of my students began his paper, “The three biggest religions in the world are Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.” I had to correct him. There are over a billion Christians and a billion Muslims in the world. Perhaps there are a billion Hindus. But there are only fifteen million

Jews. Taking a census of the world's religions, Jews are one of the smallest. Perhaps that is why our tradition forbids counting.

This week's portion begins with a census. God commands Moses to number the Israelites. There are about 600,000 men of military age, not counting women, children, and the elderly – probably between two and three million people. But this census is the exception that proves the rule. Later King David, concerned about the strength of his military, orders his chief military advisor Joab to take a census (see II Samuel 24). Joab tries to convince David otherwise; a census is forbidden. But King David stubbornly insists. God becomes angry at David's disobedience and gives him a choice of punishments – a famine, an enemy attack, or a plague. David chooses the plague.

So why are we not allowed to count our population. The Torah is trying to teach us that we are more than numbers. The Nazis tried to dehumanize the Jews by tattooing numbers on their arms. They stopped being people and started being numbers. When people become mere numbers, they lose their humanity. I have heard it said about Anne Frank, one teenage girl dying, is a tragedy. But six million people dying is just a statistic.

Our tradition discourages counting because it does not want to see people as numbers. It wants us to see the unique humanity of every human being. Part of our job at prayer services is not simply to see if we have ten Jews, but to see their faces? Who has not shown up? Who is sick? Who had a loss in the family? Who has a birthday, an anniversary, a new child or grandchild? It is not the numbers but the people who count.

God promises Abraham that his descendants will be as many as the sands in the sea. Maybe God is telling Abraham that, just as we cannot count the sands in the sea, we should not count the descendants. The Jews are a tiny percentage of the world population. Yet the influence of ideas given to the world by this tiny people is overwhelming. Think about how the world still needs to hear the words of our Torah, "Love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19). Perhaps it is time to ignore the statistics and focus on the people.