



5 ways

to stand up and be counted

The Book of Numbers opens with the counting of the tribes. 'Take a census' (1:2) is literally: 'Lift the head' in Hebrew. Amidst diverse interpretations of this verse (see overleaf) one certain positive observation is that the Israelites stand up to be counted in God's plan. Their journey to the promised land is beleaguered by rebellion and suffering, but in the end they get there. How about us? Despite our weaknesses, are we players in God's plan, or do we sit on the sidelines?

Get involved.

Don't leave the hard work to a small minority of committed people. Roll up your sleeves, join the team, and get the job done. Don't complain. Effect change. Be a leader. Get yourself onto a committee and do your best to bring about just and loving changes in your parish or local community.

Speak up. Write a letter to the editor. Post a thoughtful comment on a blog. Ask a question of the authorities. Speak up in a private conversation. Whatever the forum, raise your voice, express your values.

Listen. In your sphere of influence, whether it be the board room or the family dining table, be inclusive of the voices of the young, the marginalised, the silenced.

Be present. Sometimes just 'being there' can have a big impact. This is especially true in family life, raising children, and in times of crisis. Just 'be there.'

Vote. Be counted as a citizen. Register to vote and make sure you get to the polls on election day.

Continue the discussion drawing on your own examples/experiences of being 'counted.'

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

The *Light of Torah* series is a work arising from the Catholic community which encourages parishioners to reflect on the first five books of the bible (the Torah) with the help of Jewish commentators.

There are a number of reasons for doing this, but just to name one: we become aware of a vast body of Jewish biblical reflection and scholarship accumulated over many, many centuries of Torah study. We are introduced to some of the great names among Jewish thinkers. We glimpse their intellectual tenacity and creativity, their reverence for God's Word and their fidelity to their people. In short, we begin to learn from them, not only in terms of what they said *about* the text, but how they *approached* the text. In this way our Christian biblical horizons are expanded and enriched; we are drawn closer to the Jewish people through an appreciation of shared texts.

Certainly, each leaflet is brief. But it is a starting point, especially for grassroots audiences who would not otherwise have the opportunity to undertake Jewish studies or be involved in interfaith dialogue groups.



Numbers 1:1—4:20

*Bamidbar
'in the wilderness'*



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 1:1—4:20

The Book of Numbers tells of the Israelites' journey to the promised land. It is a journey that will see the death of most of those who went out of Egypt. By the end of the story the exodus generation is replaced by a new generation of Israelites born and raised in the wilderness. Let us join the Israelites as they make ready for their journey...beginning with a headcount.

1. Nahmanides: otherwise known as Ramban. His full name Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman. Spanish Jewish Talmudist and Torah scholar, 1194-1270.

2. Rashi: Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhak, 1040-1105. Revered Torah scholar, France.

Tasting Torah

Take a census of the whole congregation of Israelites, in their clans, by ancestral houses, according to the number of names, every male individually. (Numbers 1:2; NRSV)

“Take a census.” Literally: ‘Lift the head.’ The literal meaning of the Hebrew gives rise to a fascinating discussion by Ramban.¹ But before we continue, take a moment to consider: ‘Lift the head.’ In what way does this expression stimulate your prayerful imagination as you ponder this text?

Touching Torah

Ramban finds himself puzzling over an earlier interpretation of Rashi:² “As they say to the executioner: Lift off this one’s head!” Why would Rashi interpret this phrase in such a negative, ‘deathly’ way, wonders Ramban. Perhaps it is because those Israelites being counted will die before they reach the promised land. However this theory does not satisfy, for when a census is later taken of those entering the promised land, the same expression is used even though death is clearly not the issue.

Ramban prefers a positive view which he bases on a midrash that interprets “lift the head” as a form of praise. *Lift your head is nothing but an expression of greatness, as it is written: ‘Pharaoh will lift your head and restore you to your post’ (Gen. 40:13). The Holy One, blessed is he, said to Israel ‘I have given you exaltedness and likened you to Me.’*

Depthing Torah

Rashi’s view may also surprise considering the fact that elsewhere he describes the counting of the tribes as a sign of God’s affection for Israel: “Because of Israel’s dearness before Him, He counts them at all times.” The uncharacteristic leap in Rashi’s thinking that bothers Ramban is simply an indication of the rich pluralism of rabbinic interpretation and its fascination with the infinite depths (‘seventy faces’) of Torah. Ramban resolves the apparent contradiction by citing a second midrash:

*It is like a person who says to an executioner, ‘Take so-and-so’s head!’ Here [God] gave a hint to Moses that **if the Israelites are meritorious, they will rise to greatness, [as it says] Pharaoh will lift your head and restore you to your post (Gen.40:13)*, and if they are not meritorious, they will all die.***

Ramban concludes:

“Thus the sense of the expression ‘Lift the head’ is according to the intention. It is to be interpreted favorably for good people.”

Thus ‘Lift the head’ can signify elevation for the righteous or degradation for the unrighteous. We refer here to moral decision and its consequences. Those counted are effectively presented with a choice: will they be faithful to God...or not?

Doing Torah

- Ponder the expression ‘Lift the head.’ How would you enter this Torah discussion?
- In your experience, when has ‘head-counting’ been a sign of elevation? Of degradation?



* ‘Pharaoh will lift your head...’ (Genesis 40:13)

This verse refers to the story of Joseph, imprisoned in Egypt. There he interprets the dream of a fellow prisoner who was previously Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer. Joseph reassures the chief cupbearer that he will be released and restored to his post; i.e., he will be ‘counted’ once again among Pharaoh’s attendants.

The same expression is used a few verses later in Gen. 40:19, this time with reference to a beheading. Thus ‘Lift up the head’ can mean both ‘favor’ and ‘behead.’

Bibliography: *The Torah: With Ramban’s Commentary. Bamidbar. translated, annotated and elucidated by Rabbi Nesanel Kasnett et al. (NY: Mesorah, 2009).*