

5 Ways to make counting count!

Adults count money and calories. Children count easter eggs and days till Christmas. Does our 'counting' tell us what we consider to be 'treasure'? Read the following as a prayerful exercise and allow the Lord to affirm you, and perhaps to raise some uncomfortable (but healthy) challenges too. E.g., When we count people, who is left out of our counting, and why?



Calendar dates. The countdown to a special event: a wedding, a birth, a graduation... After this day, my life changes forever! As I anticipate future transformation, how am I called to be today?



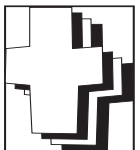
Safety. We count pills, eye-drops, surgical instruments. Tour guides, teachers and parents count heads. What does my counting reveal to me about my duty of care and the value of each individual?



Lists. Fortune 500; celebrity lists; TV ratings; Top Ten... Society is full of graded lists. Consider the lists you draw up in your own life (e.g. wedding invitations; Christmas cards). What messages do they convey?



Gratitude. A gratitude list is a marvelous way to count our blessings. The very act of naming aloud (or on paper) a blessing is a way of praising God and reinforcing the presence of grace in my life.



Statistics. Research results; opinion polls. Consider the power of numbers to convey information. What can they reveal to us? Or conceal from us? How can such numerical information be used, or misused? How responsible am I in my use of numerical data?

In the Light of Torah is a parish leaflet series designed to encourage Christians to be more attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their own sacred Scriptures, and to the gift of Judaism which gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Text by Teresa Pirola. Illustrations by Francine Pirola. © The Story Source, 2009. Further reading: www.batkol.info. Reproduction of this leaflet permitted for non-commercial church use.



In the Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

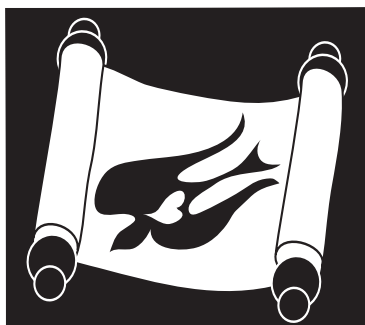
Why reflect on Torah?

At Vatican II the Church gave powerful recognition to its origins: the faith of ancient Israel; its scriptures, traditions, its fidelity to the covenant. It affirmed the fact that the Jewish and Christian peoples are profoundly linked by a shared spiritual and biblical heritage.

Following Vatican II, Church documents have continued to affirm this link. In speaking of the relationship between Old and New Testaments, Christians are urged to identify, not only with the stories of Jesus, but with the sacred stories of Jesus' people, the Jews. Our task is "*to present the events of the Old Testament not as concerning only the Jews but also as touching us personally. Abraham is truly the father of our faith (cf. Rom 4:11-12). And, it is said (1 Cor 10:1): 'our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea.' The patriarchs, prophets, and other personalities of the Old Testament have been venerated and always will be venerated as saints in the liturgical tradition of the Oriental Church as also of the Latin Church.*"

(Notes...Correct Way to Present Judaism, 1985, n.10)

This identification of Christians with the Jews, found at the very roots of Christianity, shapes the purpose of this leaflet series **Light of Torah**. By exploring Torah (the first five books of the Bible) with attention to Jewish sources and methods, the biblical text is illuminated for Christians, and their appreciation for what they share with Judaism deepens.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 1:1 - 4:20

And so we begin a new book: Numbers. Its Hebrew title, 'Bamidbar', means 'in the wilderness.' It is the story of the Israelites in their desert wanderings. It opens with the census conducted by Moses and Aaron of all the tribes. This is not the first census (e.g., see Exodus 30:11-16; 38:25-26) and it raises the question: what purpose is served by the inclusion of this detailed data?

Tasting Torah

Dear reader, here it is essential to read Numbers, chapter 1 in order to enter into the Sages' discussions. When you do, you will no doubt wonder: Why this tedious list of statistics? After the counting of the first two tribes we 'get' the picture; must we persist with the pattern for another 10 tribes? Can't we skip straight to the action? But we are learning that, in the rabbinic approach, the text repeats itself for divine reasons...

Touching Torah

One traditional explanation is strategic: the counting of men of a minimum age is essential for a nation that expects to encounter war. But the Sages (1) find moral and spiritual reasons as well. According to Rashi, God counts his people 'at all times' because *they are so precious to Him*. Nahmanides views the biblical census as evidence that God wishes to *make known to the people His loving kindness* for them. The greatness of their numbers shows forth the miracle of their survival and multiplication in the face of obstacles: famine, plagues, slavery, etc. Arama sees the census as demonstrating *the personal value of each individual* in the eyes of God. 'They were not just like animals or material objects, but each one had an importance of his own like a king or priest and that indeed God had shown special love towards them...' (2)

And you? How does God speak to you in all this 'counting'? Are there times when your love is expressed through the act of counting?

Deeper into Torah

The Israelites did just as the Lord had commanded Moses: They camped by regiments, and they set out the same way, everyone by clans, according to ancestral houses (Num. 2:34, NRSV).

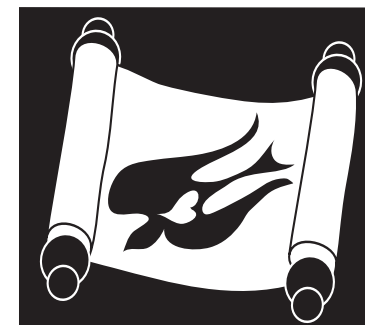
The Sages of old applied their prayerful imaginations to their Torah study, creating parables, stories and narrative connections around selected verses. You, too, can join in this creative storytelling (*midrash*). For instance:

Imagine yourself as one among the Israelites camped, ready to march at God's command. The banners of your ancestral house are blowing in the wind. What tribal pride does this arouse in you? Where do you think you're headed? What will it be like when you get there? What obstacles do you expect? Why are you prepared for war? Why have the children and women not been counted? Why is God insisting on all this preparation (census, encamped by tribe, priestly duties, Levites' duties) for the journey? Do you think this is all a metaphor for something greater than just a journey through the wilderness?

Ponder these questions. After prayerfully processing them for a day or two, journal your conclusions. What new insights emerge? (3)

Doing Torah

In our society, who *counts*? The wealthy, the powerful, the good-looking, the fashionably dressed, only those of our own 'tribe'? Who does not: women, minors, elderly, singles, unborn children, people with disabilities, those from other 'tribes'?



Count to eight

I remember family holidays...long summers at the beach. All eight of us kids would be frolicking in the surf. My Dad would stand on the edge of the water, surveying the scene. I used to wonder why he didn't come in, but now - as a parent - I understand exactly what he was doing: acting as lifeguard and counting heads!

1. Our selection here: Rashi (revered Jewish commentator; 11th C. French) Nahmanides (13th C. Spanish commentator) Arama (14th C. Spanish Talmudist).

2. Arama quoted in Leibowitz, 15.

3. This section is adapted from Jack Driscoll's parashah commentary, 2008.

Sources: Driscoll, 'Parashah Commentary: *Badmidar*,' 2008 (www.batkol.info); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (Jerusalem, 1994); Rashi: *Commentary on the Torah, Vol. 4* (NY: Mesorah, 2001); Young, *Who Is Jesus the Jew?* (Hobart, Australia, 2004).