

Lift the Head!

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 the medieval Jewish commentator known as Ramban.¹ Ramban finds himself puzzling over an earlier interpretation of the great Torah scholar 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.’

This verse refers to the story of Joseph, imprisoned in Egypt. (See Genesis 40:13) 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 ‘favour’ and ‘behead.’

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 favourably 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?

Reflection:

- 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? •

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.

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

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