

DAVID'S SIN: COUNTING THE PEOPLE

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The Book of Samuel records a curious episode: *The anger of the Lord flared up against Israel and He incited David against them, saying: "Go and number Israel and Judah"* (II Sam. 24:1). David then made a very reluctant Joab, his army commander, responsible for counting the people *so that I may know the size of the population* (24:2). It is not certain what caused the Lord's anger. However, the theological difficulty of God inciting David to sin is toned down in the Book of Chronicles: *Satan arose against David and incited David to number Israel* (I Chron. 21:1).

At any rate, this census was regarded as a grievous sin on David's part, leading to the death of 70,000 people by pestilence. Commentators are divided as to the exact nature of David's offense. Some say it was because the counting was done without using the half-shekel (Radak, Abarbanel). Others accuse David of pride (see Ramban on Numbers 1:3). Others again blame him for putting his trust in numbers rather than in God (Rabag). Yet Saul took a census of the population on two occasions (I Sam. 11:8; 15:4) and none of the people were affected.

I propose an alternative explanation. In II Samuel it is stated: *David reigned over all Israel, and David executed true justice among all his people* (II Sam. 8:15). This is followed by an enumeration of all his key administrators: the chief of staff, recorders, priests, scribe, etc. Chapter 20 goes on to record the later years of David's reign. An ominous, unconsidered name is added here to the list of his chief advisors: *Adoram was in charge of forced labor* (II Sam. 20:24). It should be noted that the same chapter records an insurrection and names its leader: *'We have no portion in David, no share in Jesse's son!'* . . . *All the men of Israel left David and followed Sheba son of Bichri* (II Sam. 20:1-2). This second rebellion against David (the first was led by his son Absalom) points to the king's waning popularity. The appointment of Adoram may have been one reason for the growing disaffection. Chapter 22 of I Chronicles describes David's preparations for the building of the Temple. Addressing his son Solomon, he says:

"I have laid aside for the House of the Lord one hundred thousand talents of gold and one million talents of silver, and so much copper and iron it cannot be weighed. I have also laid aside wood and stone, and you shall add to them. An abundance of workmen is at your disposal: hewers, workers in stone and wood, and every kind of craftsman in every type of material . . . " (I Chron. 22:14-15).

There is a Talmudic dictum which runs: *asur li-mnot et Yisrael afilu li-dvar mitzvah* [it is forbidden to conduct a census of Israel even for a *mitzvah*] (TB Yoma 22b). Could it be that David's sin was the taking a census for corvée (unpaid labor) when preparations were in hand to build the Temple and other royal structures?

We know that a palace was built for David with technical assistance provided by Hiram, king of Tyre (II Sam. 5:11). David's introduction of the *mas* (corvée) had serious consequences for his son, Solomon, and grandson Rehoboam. King Solomon appointed Jeroboam as overseer of the labor force (I Kgs. 11:28), but he rebelled and fled to Egypt. Later, when Rehoboam succeeded his father on the throne, he harshly turned down a request by delegates from the disaffected northern tribes of Israel to lighten their heavy burden of taxes and forced labor (I Kgs. 12:13-14). Adoram, the supervisor of Rehoboam's labor force, was stoned to death by an infuriated mob (I Kgs. 12:18); and the northern tribes broke away from the Davidic monarchy (I Kgs. 12:20), which then split into the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Thus, David's real transgression was not simply counting the Israelites but his purpose in having them counted – the institution of forced labor which would lead to revolt and a divided kingdom.