

Bamidbar

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Light points

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הר"ר ישעי' זושא ב"ר אברהם דוד ע"ה ווילהעלם
נלב"ע ביום ד' שבט ה'תשפ"ב
תנצב"ה



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במדבר *Bamidbar*

א:ב | 1:2

שְׂאוּ אֶת רֹאשׁ כָּל עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

*Take the sum of all the congregation
of the children of Israel.*

Numbers that Matter

In the first thirteen months after their exodus from Egypt, the Jewish people were counted three times.¹ Rashi explains the significance of all this counting: “Because of their dearness to Him [G-d], He counts them all the time.”

The significance of all the counting is not for G-d to determine the precise number of individuals within the Jewish nation—as G-d surely knows their number without conducting an actual census—but, in Rashi’s words,² “to make their dearness known.” In spiritual terms, this means that the cen-

1. See Shemos 12:37; ibid. 30:12–16; and Bamidbar, chapters 1–3.

2. Shemos 1:1.

sus revealed within the Jewish people themselves the *nature* of their endearment to G-d.

How so? Because in a census, the value that each individual adds to the count is the same; every person counts as no less and no more than one. This means that the count highlights a quality common to all Jews, regardless of their background, education or spiritual sophistication: the “Jewish spark”—the essential Jewishness of the soul of every Jew. This “Jewish spark” manifests as a sense of unbreakable attachment to G-d, due to which every Jew, regardless of their level of Jewish knowledge or observance, is capable of surrendering their very life for their faith in order not to separate from the one G-d in whom they intrinsically believe.

This indomitable “Jewish spark,” common to all Jews, is the Jewish people’s greatest source of “dearness” before G-d. By taking a simple count of the number of people that make up the Jewish nation, G-d “made their dearness known,” revealing within them (and in fact, to the entire world) the essential Jewish spark possessed by every single Jew.

—*Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 8, pp. 3–4

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*Take the sum of all the congregation
of the children of Israel.*

Just a Number?

If a foreign substance falls into a mixture and is minute in comparison to the rest of the mixture, according to Jewish law we may disregard the foreign substance to some degree, and treat the entire mixture homogeneously. For example, if one piece of non-kosher food lands among several pieces of kosher food and cannot be identified, we treat the entire mixture as kosher.³

There are certain items, however, which are inherently significant and can never be nullified, even when they are lost among thousands of others. These include: a living animal, a complete creature (as opposed to a piece of one), and any *davar sheb'minyan* (object that is counted)—an item that is sold by unit rather than by weight or volume. When we reckon each unit as an individual article of sale, we establish that each unit is independently significant. We therefore may not ignore the presence of even one such unit, despite the mixture containing thousands more that seem identical.

This was the purpose, says the Shaloh,⁴ of the census that G-d instructed be taken of the Jewish people. The count itself

3. At times, a greater degree of nullification is required, such as with a liquid mixture, in which a ratio of 60:1 (or more) is necessary in order to discount the prohibited food.

4. Shnei Luchos Habris, Torah Shebichsav, Bamidbar.

revealed the prominence of each individual Jew. As a result, the specialness of a Jew's identity became an unignorable reality, despite the Jewish people being only a tiny minority among the nations of the world.

In addition, the prominence of a *davar sheb'minyan* is unique even in comparison to the other possible forms of "halachic prominence" mentioned above (live animal, complete creature). Whereas those articles of distinction are noticeably special, the importance of the counted object might not be observable at all—the only indicator of its significance is its being counted. Similarly, the count of the Jewish people brought to the fore the inner specialness of the Jew that is not contingent on his qualities or actions, but due simply to being chosen as a member of G-d's nation.

Since the time that the Jewish people were counted, not only is the Jew capable of maintaining his unique identity regardless of his surroundings, his surroundings can recognize and be influenced by his specialness as well.

—*Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 4, pp. 1019–1020; vol. 18, p. 25

 1:2 | א:ב

שָׂאוּ אֶת רֹאשׁ כָּל עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם

Take the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses.

The Differences We Have in Common

The census taken in the beginning of the Book of Bamidbar seems paradoxical. On the one hand, a tally of the entire nation, in which each person counts as no more and no less than *one*, means that each person is counted and valued equally. A count of this nature highlights the qualities that are common to every person in the census.

On the other hand, the Torah states that Bnei Yisrael were counted “by their families, by their fathers’ houses.” As Rashi explains⁵ (and as is apparent from the Torah’s accounting of each tribe separately), the members of each tribe were counted individually, and then the sum total of all the tribes was tallied. Counting each tribe individually implies that each tribe represents a unique unit whose qualities *differ* from the others, warranting an individual census.

The conflicting features of this count—its emphasis on the distinct qualities of each individual tribe, but at the same time every individual being of equal value, symbolizing the similarity of all members of Bnei Yisrael—are not actually a contradiction.

5. Bamidbar 1:2.

The Torah's emphasis on the distinctiveness of each tribe (some thriving in Torah study, others in business, etc.,⁶ corresponding to each tribe's unique path in the service of G-d) is not to highlight their differences, but to express how all their unique features *equally* contribute to the beautiful tapestry that is the Jewish nation. The tribes were therefore first counted separately, and then the totals were combined, with each person holding equal value in the sum total, to teach us that the unique qualities each Jew brings to the table are equally crucial to the nation as a whole.

—*Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 23, pp. 6-7

6. See Bereishis 49:3-27.

 3:8 | ח:ג

וְשָׁמְרוּ אֶת כָּל כֵּלֵי אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֶת מִשְׁמֶרֶת
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲבֹד אֶת עֲבֹדַת הַמִּשְׁכָּן

*They shall guard all the vessels of the Ohel Moed,
the charge of Bnei Yisrael, to perform the service of
the Mishkan.*

You Must Be a Levi Too

The Rambam writes that the extraordinary sanctity that G-d conferred upon the tribe of Levi is not exclusive to biological descendants of that tribe. Rather, “any individual whose spirit motivates him and whose wisdom guides him to set himself apart and stand before G-d to serve Him and worship Him... behold, that person is sanctified...”⁷

One might assume, however, that the ability to “be sanctified” to serve G-d, to genuinely and entirely devote oneself to carrying out the Divine mission of making this entire world a “dwelling place” for Him—i.e., the very purpose of Creation—is not for everybody. After all, the Rambam describes the person who can achieve this sanctity as an individual “whose spirit motivates him and whose wisdom guides him.” If I am not yet at that level of inspiration and understanding, who is to say that I can be “sanctified like a Levi,” to truly devote myself exclusively to the service of G-d?

The Torah removes this doubt when it says, “They shall guard all the vessels of the Ohel Moed, the charge of Bnei Yisrael, to perform the service of the Mishkan,”⁸ which means,

7. Mishneh Torah, Hil. Shemittah V'Yovel 13:13.

8. Bamidbar 3:8.

as Rashi explains, that although this service is actually the duty of Bnei Yisrael, “the *Levi'im* serve in their stead, as their agents.”

One of the principles of the laws of agency is that one cannot commission an agent to act as his legal proxy if the commissioner himself is not legally allowed to perform that task.⁹ But the Torah states that the Levites’ responsibility to sing in the Mishkan, and to transport it from place to place when Bnei Yisrael traveled, were in essence “the charge of Bnei Yisrael”—the responsibility of the entire Jewish nation. It is only that “the *Levi'im* serve in their stead, as their agents.” Since one can empower the Levi to act as his proxy only if he can potentially do the service himself, evidently every Jew has the innate ability “to stand before G-d to serve Him.”¹⁰

Accordingly, though the actual service in the Temple has been delegated to the tribe of Levi, the Levi-like ability to wholly devote oneself to bringing about the Divine purpose of creation is still within reach of every single Jew.

—*Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 13, p. 15

9. See Talmud, Kiddushin 23b.

10. Devarim 10:8.

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מרת רעכיל ציפרה
ב"ר שאול אלישע ע"ה
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