

WE ARE ALWAYS COUNTED BEFORE G-D

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "Hashem spoke to Moshe.... Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel" (Bamidbar 1:1-2).

Rashi cites our Sages (Midrash Aggadah) in stating, "Because they were dear to Him, He counted them often. When they left Egypt, He counted them. When [many] fell on account of the golden calf, He counted them to determine the number of survivors. When He came to make His Shechinah dwell among them, He counted them. On the first of Nissan the Sanctuary was erected, and on the first of Iyar He counted them."

The author of Shiurei Torah is surprised by Rashi's statement: How can we attribute such an attitude to G-d, an attitude which – although common in man – consists of constantly counting what we value? How can we assert that He also constantly counts the Children of Israel out of love? In fact we regularly count what is valuable to us in order to accurately determine its quantity. However does Hashem, for Whom nothing is a mystery, really need a census for this?

Sometimes, when clarity of mind is lacking, men count their possessions even when they already know how much they have! They do this in order to assure themselves that their possessions are indeed intact, and to remove all doubts from their mind. Yet can G-d have doubts?

Let us try and explain this concept. It is certainly impossible to compare the "counting" carried out by the Creator to that done by a human being. This is because, as we already stated, nothing is hidden from Him. He alone probes the heart and mind, searching all that is stirring within each of us. Indeed, "He counts the number of the stars, to all of them He assigns names.... His understanding is beyond reckoning.... He gives to an animal its food, to the young ravens that cry out" (Tehillim 147:4-9). Since He knows the exact number of animals, then He certainly knows the number of His children, human beings, and doesn't need a census.

Nevertheless, He constantly counts them out of love. Why? In order for men to realize that G-d counts [i.e., evaluates] them in every circumstance. When we do wrong, Hashem probes deep inside and takes an accounting of us in order to decide what punishment to inflict, be it severe or light. He may even conduct a more in-depth accounting that considers details that only Hashem knows, details that our meager intellect cannot grasp.

Likewise, when we climb to a higher spiritual level, G-d counts us and judges us lovingly and carefully in order to make His holy presence dwell within us.

In this way, we will merit all the good reserved for us in the World to Come, near G-d.

"Because they were dear to Him, He counted them often" – Hashem loves us when we hoist ourselves up, and even when we stumble and adopt shameful ways. In fact it is said, "For Hashem admonishes the one He loves" (Mishlei 3:12). Now we are His children, and in this regard we may cite the verse: "Know in your heart that just as a father chastises his son, so Hashem your G-d chastises you" (Devarim 8:5).

We must internalize the fact that even when we diminish in Torah, even when we sin, we are counted by G-d, which is why we are sometimes punished by Him. If we improve ourselves in performing mitzvot and learning Torah, we will also be counted. As a result, we must devote ourselves to constantly examining our ways and scrutinizing our deeds in order not to be counted at a time of spiritual decline, but rather in a state of spiritual elevation.

This is why the verse states, "Take a census," which in Hebrew is Se'u et-rosh (literally, "Raise the head"). We are advised to constantly be in the process of elevation ("head" being a term for "elevation"), thus being counted for good and for blessing in order to become a receptacle for G-d's kindnesses. We will be punished in the opposite case, and even if we do not immediately understand why, G-d alone holds all secrets, for all His deeds are just.

The words of the Midrash now seem clearer: "Because they were dear to Him, He counted them often" – meaning both at a time of spiritual elevation and well as spiritual decline. When they left Egypt, He counted them while they were immersed in the 49 degrees of impurity, before being delivered. Nevertheless, G-d counted them out of His love for them, using the attribute of mercy rather than the attribute of justice to liberate them from the crucible of Egypt.

Likewise, He counted them when they made the golden calf, in order to identify and punish those who had committed this sin, as it is written: "I, Hashem, plumb the heart and test the innermost thoughts, to give a man according to his ways, the fruit of his deeds" (Jeremiah 17:10). This applies in their moment of weakness, thereby making them understand that He is punishing them because they abandoned the source of living waters in order to dig broken cisterns.

Finally, He counted them when the Sanctuary was being erected, when He desired to make His Shechinah dwell among them, as it is written: "Let them make a Sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them" (Shemot 25:8). The goal of this census was to prepare them for attaining the ideal state, for they could only receive the Shechinah in a state described by the verse, "The wise will shine like the radiance of the firmament" (Daniel 12:3).

Publication of
HEVRAT PINTO

Under the Direction of
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Pinto Shlita**

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Thus each person must realize and understand that he is counted at every instant, be it in a state of spiritual elevation or, in the opposite case, a state of spiritual decline. Hashem looks on from above and evaluates the deeds of man in order to decide if they tilt towards good or evil. Thus a person's actions are weighed and can render him worthy, or they can render him unworthy (through a judgment or in-depth judgment). Even

Words of Sages

Acquiring His Own Identity

Rabbi Yaakov Galinsky began a discourse by saying, "When I was still living in Poland, we were told an incredibly instructive story. Non-Jews worked hard in Poland, drawing water and cutting wood each day for a small amount of money. Many non-Jews worked in Jewish homes and could therefore speak Yiddish.

"One night, after a day of exhausting work, one of these men passed near a synagogue and noticed a Jew that he knew begging for charity in front of the building. His hands were filled with pennies, a fist-full of coins. He approached the beggar, noticed his palm, and asked him: 'How much did you collect?' He replied, 'Three zlotys.'

"The non-Jew responded, 'How were you able to collect so much?' The poor man explained, 'Here, everyone passes me by between Mincha and Arvit, about 300 congregants who come to synagogue each day. Since Jews are merciful and children of the merciful, all I have to say in order for them to throw me a coin is: "Jews, give me some charity!" That's how I've managed to accumulate three hundred pennies.'

"This exchange made the non-Jew think: 'I must be crazy going out to work for an entire day to earn so little! From now on, I'll sit in front of the synagogue and ask for charity.' On the following day, he rested for the entire morning and early afternoon, and got up towards evening. He then immediately headed to the great synagogue and began to cry out in Yiddish, 'Merciful Jews, give some tzeddakah to a poor man!' The congregants saw this beggar, and therefore they gave him a penny, half-penny, followed by another penny. In fact he collected a large amount, but still wasn't satisfied. Why should he have been? He saw the beggar on the other side of the synagogue receiving ten pennies at a time!

"At the end of Arvit, after the congregants left, the non-Jew said to this beggar: 'Tell me your secret. Why do people give you ten pennies at a time, but not me?' He replied, 'Look, I'm a convert, and Jews feel a certain degree of sympathy for converts. That's why they give me charity more generously.'

"On the following day, the non-Jew began to cry out, in Yiddish of course: 'Merciful Jews, have pity on a poor man who is a convert!' At that point they generously gave him money. Everything was going well, but he noticed that the other beggar was receiving 20 pennies at a time, and sometimes even half a lira!

"After Arvit, he approached him and discreetly asked: 'Why do they give you more than me?' He answered, 'You see, I'm the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, and as the descendant of a tzaddik, I receive much more.'

"On the following day, the non-Jew got up early and began crying out, 'My teachers, give charity to a poor man, a convert, and the descendant of the Baal Shem Tov!' At that point, he no longer received

minor deeds, whose value we fail to grasp, are not overlooked by the Throne of Glory, and Hashem knows how "to give a man according to his ways, the fruit of his deeds." Furthermore, even good thoughts are taken into account and rewarded during a more in-depth judgment, as was the case for Jacob, in regards to whom it is said: "G-d answers the righteous according to his way."

a cent. He cried and cried, but people passed him by with a smile. He couldn't understand the striking contradiction that his words contained: Either he was a grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, or he was a convert!"

The Mind of a Non-Jew

This is sometimes our problem as well: We live a life of contradiction, and the education of our children is put in jeopardy. It is a tragic and dreadful phenomenon. Some of us have not decided who we are: Observant or non-observant, meticulous or negligent in the observance of mitzvot, descendants of the Baal Shem Tov or converts. We have not yet clearly determined our identity. When a parent vacillates in this area, educating his children becomes a problem.

We must procure a single and unique identity for our entire lives, one that does not change in response to circumstances, age, or whatever life brings to us. We must possess the identity of a king, as it is said concerning the righteous: "And King David was old" – despite his age, he was still king.

If one fine day someone says, "I'm a convert," and the next he declares, "I'm the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov," everyone will ridicule him and say: "Decide who you are!" He prays with a minyan one morning, but sleeps in the next... a true sheep following the lead of his friends! One morning he gets up on his left foot, while on another he gets up on his right. He goes to class one day, but fails to attend for two more.

In the Shema we recite, "You shall teach them to your children, and you shall speak of them." The Chatam Sofer points out that it should say: "You shall teach them to your children, and they shall speak of them," meaning that we would expect our children to speak of them. In that case, the Shema should have said, for example: "You shall teach them to your children, and they shall speak of them when they sit in the house and when they walk on the road." The Chatam Sofer explains, however, that "You shall teach them to your children" means that if you want your children to study – if you want to fully accomplish, "You shall teach them to your children" – then you yourself must study and set an example: "You shall speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road." When children see their father, after an exhausting day, running to synagogue in order to learn, setting a time to study Torah instead of resting, they will then understand the importance of overcoming the evil inclination, since their father breaks the evil inclination of his fatigue.

However if a man fulfills the verse, "Who relates His word to Jacob, His statutes and judgments to Israel" (Tehillim 147:19), without putting them into practice himself, what can we expect from his children?

Raise the Head

It is written, “Take a census [literally, ‘Raise the head’] of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel” (Bamidbar 1:2).

In numerous places, the Holy One, blessed be He, tells Moshe: “Raise the head,” “when you raise the head,” and so on. Why?

He said to him, “Moshe, raise this people as much as you can. It is as if you were raising Me,” as it is written: “Raise the head.” It does not say “raise the Children of Israel,” but “raise the head of the Children of Israel,” as it is written: “Their king will pass before them, with Hashem at their head” (Micah 2:13).

To what can this be compared? It is like a craftsman making a crown and setting it with precious stones. Someone passes by and sees him, and he says to him: “Set as many precious stones as you can inside, for it will be placed upon the head of the king.”

Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: “Watch over this people, who set Me as King over all the nations at the Sea of Reeds by saying: ‘This is my G-d, and I will adorn Him.’” Hence it is written, “Raise the head.”

– Pesikta Rabbati

They Shall Inherit Glory

It is written, “With you there shall be a man from each tribe, one who is the head of his father’s house” (Bamidbar 1:4).

Why did they have to count a man from each tribe? It was in order to confer greatness and importance to all the tribes. We also find that no tribe failed to produce judges and prophets.

– Lekach Tov

Israel Asked and Issachar Answered

It is written, “For Issachar, Nethanel ben Tzuar” (Bamidbar 1:8).

Why was he called Nethanel (literally, “G-d has given”)?

Because the tribe of Issachar gave themselves entirely to Torah, it gave G-d to Israel.

Nethanel ben Tzuar: The members of the tribe of Issachar took upon themselves the pain (tza’ar) and difficulties of all Israel. The Children of Israel asked them for the Halachah, and Issachar answered them, as it is written: “All their brothers followed their counsel” (I Chronicles 12:33).

– Midrash Aggadah

He Deserved to Go Before

It is written, “For the sons of Gad, by their generations, after their families, by the house of their fathers” (Bamidbar 1:24).

Why did Gad deserve to go before Judah?

The reason that the sons of Gad went before others in numerous places is because Moshe was buried in the territory of Gad.

– Ma’or HaAfela

Working on Middot

It is written, “The sons of Naphtali, by their generations, after their families, by the house of their fathers” (Bamidbar 1:42).

The reason that the sons of Naphtali are mentioned last in every census is because they did not work enough on their middot.

The Sages ask, “Why did Naphtali name his sons Yachzeel, Guni, Yetzer, and Shillem?”

Yachzeel – they were insolent (mechutzafim) before Hashem.

Guni – they said despicable things (gnai) about each other.

Yetzer – they followed their evil inclination (yetzer).

Shillem – they repaid (meshalmim) good with evil.

This is why the sons of Naphtali are listed after all the other tribes, as a sign of contempt.

– Ma’or HaAfela

Blue and Purple

It is written, “They shall clear the ash from the altar and spread upon it a cloth of purple” (Bamidbar 4:13).

The altar of burnt-offering, insofar as it was not located within the covered interior, was not covered with blue, but with purple. Why with purple [argaman]? Because it argued Israel free from [arag min] sin, for upon it they sacrificed continual offerings every day, as well as sin-offerings and guilt-offerings, burnt-offerings and peace-offerings.

– Bamidbar Rabba 4:17

In the Light of the Parsha

The Torah was Given Only by the Merit of Abraham

The Sages state, “The angels wanted to attack Moshe at that point, but G-d made Moshe’s features resemble those of Abraham, and He said to the angels: ‘Are you not ashamed to touch this man, to whom you descended and in whose house you ate?’” (Shemot Rabba 28:1).

This requires an explanation, for the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth (Shabbat 55a). That said, how could He say something that was not the truth, telling the angels that Moshe was really Abraham, to whose home they had descended?

We may explain this according to the verse, “Abraham was old, advanced in days, and Hashem had blessed Abraham bakol [in all]” (Bereshith 24:1). The Sages teach, “Everywhere it is written ‘and Hashem,’ it means Him and His celestial court” (Yerushalmi, Berachot 9:5). This means that the angels also agreed with Him that Abraham was worthy of a blessing, for he endured ten trials and emerged victorious from them all. That is what Hashem told the angels: “This man Moshe is among the descendants of Abraham, in whose home you ate. And you agreed with Me that he was worthy of a blessing. Since he was blessed, his children and descendants to the end of the generations are also blessed. Therefore how can you attack him?”

Does this mean that Abraham was blessed, along with his children and descendants, or does it mean that he alone was blessed, without his descendants being included in this blessing? It is written, “And Hashem had blessed Abraham bakol [in all].” The text could have simply stated that Hashem had blessed Abraham. What does the term bakol add? It has the same numerical value as ben (“son”), teaching us that Abraham was blessed, him and his children along with him, and grandchildren are like children (Yebamot 62b). Hence we may say that the Torah was given only by the merit of Abraham. What allowed Israel to receive the Torah? It was this blessing, which Hashem gave to Abraham.

Our Sages clearly affirm this stating, “G-d said to Moshe: ‘It is only for the sake of Abraham that the Torah is given to you’” (Shemot Rabba 28:1).

Rabbi Moshe Meir Yoshor Zatzal, who had the merit of learning in the yeshiva of the eminent kohen among his brothers, Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen of Radin, recorded for the generations to come the practices and habits of his teacher, the Chafetz Chaim, in prayer. He described what he had a chance to see as follows:

Anyone who has ever seen our Rav during prayer will never forget the scene. It was obvious that a love for the Creator burned in the depths of his soul. He appeared completely detached from this world, and only his soul seemed to emit a supplication. His mind shined with supreme light, and his face reflected the Shechinah that dwelled within him. He pronounced each word with sanctity and tremendous concentration. For the entire hour that followed prayer, it was difficult for him to deal with other things, and to descend “from the mountain to the people.”

He was constantly infused with sacred reverence as he prayed, with his back curved and head lowered. His enflamed face emitted an expression of joy, while on the inside he shook as his heart contained a sacred flame. His shoulders moved slowly while his entire body trembled and shook, his lips whispering the prayer of a silent voice, barely audible. He demonstrated complete simplicity, submission, and humility.

The gaon Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky recounted that in his youth, he once stayed overnight at an inn in a certain town. Before sunrise, he was drawn out of sleep by a melodious voice, so sweet that it was entrancing, and it could be heard through the wall. A man was repeating the Nishmat prayer in Yiddish, word for word. Rabbi Yechezkel was so moved by it that he could not return to sleep. Later on, he learned that this voice was that of the Chafetz Chaim, who was staying in the adjacent room.

One of his most eminent disciples, the gaon Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman, recounted that when he was studying at the Novardok yeshiva, he had a deep desire to meet the Chafetz Chaim. Hence he traveled to Radin. When he arrived at the Chafetz Chaim’s home, he found him standing in a corner of the room, beseeching Hashem and whispering a prayer with a broken heart and in tears. He wept hot tears as he prayed for a suffering child in his neighborhood.

Rav Kahaneman was deeply moved by this sight: A person sensing the pain of others to such a degree that he shed tears for them, as if he were praying for himself! From then on, he maintained a close connection to the Chafetz Chaim.

The Chafetz Chaim once expressed his astonishment to a yeshiva student who had come to ask him for a blessing: “Without G-d’s help,” he said, “why are you looking for the blessing of an insignificant man who possesses neither will nor power? It would be better for you to address Hashem, for He can and even wants to give you the blessing that befits you. You should also request a blessing for the Jewish people as you pray, and you will be answered at the same time.”

Hashem hears the prayer of each Jew, even though He “longs to hear the prayer of the righteous” (Yebamot 64a). He also opens the door to anyone who seeks to repent. Nevertheless, the most precious prayer in His eyes remains that of a poor man who expresses his feelings to G-d. As it is said concerning Ishmael, “G-d heard the voice of the lad” (Bereshith 21:17), concerning which Rashi cites the Midrash in explaining: “From here [we learn] that a sick person’s prayer is more effective than the prayer of others on his behalf, and is the first to be accepted.”

Thus from a very young age, the Chafetz Chaim accustomed himself to pouring out his heart before Hashem, not to becoming dependent on others for this, as he revealed: “As a child, I was orphaned and poor. I grew up and G-d helped me. When I needed something, I grabbed my

book of Tehillim, went to a corner, and Hashem heard me.”

Hence to the thousands of people who traveled to the Chafetz Chaim’s home from the four corners of the world, all seeking his blessing, he would give them this advice: “How can I, a simple Jew, rescue you? Only G-d in His immense kindness has the ability to save you, and it is solely to Him that you should address your supplications.”

One day, a man on the brink of despair came to share his troubles with the Chafetz Chaim. He had financial problems, his wife was sickly, and he was having great difficulty educating his children. At that point, the Chafetz Chaim interrupted him and said: “Why are you entering by the kitchen when the front door is open? You pray every day, you read the Shema...do you really need a better remedy than this for sustenance and success?”

As the Chafetz Chaim was staying in Vilna one time, the local chazan begged him to pray for the healing of his suffering daughter. He answered him as follows: “Such a request from you surprises me. In fact the chazanut is your profession, and you are therefore used to praying for others. Pray for yourself this time, and Hashem will help you!” The chazan followed his advice, shedding tears before Hashem with a broken and contrite heart, and thus earned a response.

The Chafetz Chaim would often say that when a person addresses his prayer to Hashem, he should do it as if he were addressing his own mother, who obviously wants only what is good for him. As we read, “Surely I have stilled and silenced my soul, like a suckling child at his mother’s side” (Tehillim 131:2), meaning that we should cleave to Hashem just as a baby cleaves to his mother and is completely dependent on her. A baby knows that his mother will never get upset at him, even if he makes many requests of her. Furthermore, although human beings have a natural tendency to be upset and harbor resentment when constantly being asked for things, the same does not apply to the Creator. On the contrary, the more we pray to Him, the more He answers our requests.

The Main Fight

The evil inclination does all that it can to fight and disturb us during prayer, because fulfilling this mitzvah is the most fitting way to defeat it. Hence we must concentrate on praying with all our strength. The evil inclination is ready to fight us, the Jewish people, and to prevent us from pouring out our hearts as we should during prayer. In effect, prayer has ability to “defeat it more than all the other mitzvot.” We can therefore deduce its great value and importance.

– Be’er Moshe

Guard Your Tongue

Saying Good Things About Others

There are certain things that are forbidden to say because of avak (the “dust” of) Lashon Harah. For example, it is forbidden to say such things as, “Who would have believed that [So-and-so] would have become what he is today?” and “Don’t talk about [So-and-so]. I don’t want to say bad things about him,” or similar remarks.

It is also considered avak Lashon Harah to say good things about someone in the presence of people who dislike him, for this will lead them to disparage him.

– Chafetz Chaim