

G-D DOESN'T COUNT JEWS

by Rabbi Label Lam

Hashem spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt saying: "Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers' household, by number of the names, every male according to their head count." (Bamidbar 1:1-2)

Because of G-d's love for the Jewish People he counts them frequently. (Rashi)

According to their head count: They gave a half shekel and the coins were counted since it is forbidden to count them literally by head. (Rashi)

At a shiva call years back a psychiatrist abruptly asked me, "What's G-d doing right now!" I humbly admitted, "I don't know!" I then added, "We're not here to psychoanalyze G-d! The Almighty is not on the couch, we are!" I have wondered long afterward if I had answered him correctly. What is G-d doing right now?

According to what we learn at the beginning of this week's portion we have better than a good possibility of guessing what G-d is doing right now. He's counting His people. Yes! Now! Not just back then. Like a parent or grandparent that looks frequently at his or her collection of photos so are we being observed and counted admiringly.

We might be misled however to conclude that it's numbers that count. How do we do it? You ask! Volume! Not so! Majority rules! No sir! Firstly, we are a relatively small nation. Why count us? Secondly, it's understood that that we are forbidden to count individuals by number. If the aggregate, the total is all that matters, then why should there be any limitation to the system of counting?

There were two brothers at opposite ends of the world in very different living conditions. One lived in a tiny apartment in Jerusalem with his wife and twelve children on a meager budget. The other was a wealthy man in a large American city but he and his wife after many years of marriage had no children. The wealthy one proposed to his brother in Israel that they make a trade. He is willing to grant one million dollars in exchange for one- any one of their twelve children. It was too tempting. Under the weight of great financial strain they agreed.

The night came to consummate the deal by choosing the child to be sent away. The parents waited for the late hour to arrive. They circulated a few times in tears as they peered at their sleeping

children. Then they made their decision and called the brother in America to tell him the news. "No deal!"

The other desperately countered, "You have twelve and I have none and you could certainly use the money!" Not yielding to the pressure this time the one in Israel tried to console his brother's disappointment. "The deal was based on a false premise that we have twelve children. When we looked carefully, my wife and I came to realize that it's not true. We have only one Shimon, one Rivka, one Aaron, etc." Reducing a person to a mere number serves to erase the unique quality, the special-ness of that individual.

There's a story about a young returnee to the ways of Judaism that had a large and unseemly tattoo etched on his arm. He avoided all situations where it might be seen. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah when so many are visiting the local Mikvah (ritual bath) he adopted the strategy to arrive early and keep the towel over his arm to avoid the rush and the risk of being discovered.

His worst fears were realized when while hurrying on the slippery tiles his feet flew out from underneath him. A deathly silence filled the room. The shameful symbol of his ill-spent youth became exposed to all. The embarrassment was so deep. Then an elderly man with numbers on his arm lifted the fellow from the floor. Pointing to his arm he told him, "This was my taste of hell and that was probably yours. Let us go into the water together!"

When Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch was asked why he left the largest rabbinic position in Europe to join nine struggling families in Frankfurt Germany he is reputed to have answered an answer that perhaps begs many more questions, "G-d doesn't count Jews. He weighs them!"

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