

CLASS 50 - BAMIDBAR

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying.... take a count of the entire congregation of Israel, according to their families...." (Bamidbar 1:1-2)

"Because they are dear to Him, He counts them always." (Rashi, ad. loc.)

Is it a Mitzva to count the Bnai Yisrael?

"When you count the Bnai Yisrael by number, every man shall give an atonement for his life when they are being counted, so that there not be a plague when counting them." (Shemos 30:12)

"For the evil eye dominates what has been counted, and plague befalls them." (Rashi, ad. loc.)

Is counting good or bad?

The Talmud itself addresses this contradiction:

"Rebbe Yonasan poses a contradiction: it is written: 'And the number of Bnai Yisrael will be as the sand at the sea...' yet, it is written: '...which cannot be measured, and cannot be counted.' (Hoshea 2:1)"

"This is not a difficulty, for one is at a time when Israel heeds G-d's will, and one is at a time where Israel does not heed G-d's will."

"...this is not a difficulty, one is at the hands of man, and one is at the hands of Heaven." (Yoma 22b)

At times, counting is preferred, and at times, it is quite dangerous.

The Ramban states this clearly:

"... 'Se'u Es Rosh..' [Count by head] - for if they merit, they will rise to glory...and if they do not, they will all die out..."

In our shiur this week, we will explain the two sides of counting, one by man, and one by G-d.

1

The Maharal cites the argument of the medieval philosophers who question the belief in one G-d. If G-d is One, they claim, how can He create a world that is defined by its multiplicity, a world of good and evil, health and disease, with no apparent point of unification.

Every action is defined by its creator. Much as fire spawns heat, and water produces moisture, One

G-d would create a world that reflects His perfection, complete and eternal.

But, who is to say that our world is not precisely that? True, we witness the varied problems and crises that define modern life, but perhaps it is all a question of perspective. Were we to see the world through a different lens, creation would be an image of G-d's handiwork, and a testimony to His glory.

Let us explain.

"This world is like a corridor before the world-to-come..." (Avos 4:21)

The lobby one sets foot in when entering a building has no independent status of its own. Though no structure is created without one, the entryway merely exists as a function of a larger whole, and has substance only to the extent that it serves this purpose.

Similarly, creation is a parallel structure, with a lobby that should be limited towards this end - the productive development of heaven's revelation, and the actualization of eternity in this physical dimension. This world is only a "Movil" - a carrier, and its physical benefits are as substantive as "Hevel" - nothing but a whiff, and a smell, vanity of vanities.

Taken on its own, at surface value, the world is a place of death and destruction, and no physical being can escape the finite nature of his temporal and corporeal existence.

When man counts on his own, he sees himself at the center of life, and he relates to everything he touches in the same way. All the world is reduced by this minimalistic perspective to the limited standard of mortal man. This is 'Ayin HaRa' - the evil eye of man that puts everything and everyone into their own little corner.

We long instead for the counting of G-d, a numerical system of 'Minyan' , 'Pakod' or 'Nimneh', where every man in Israel is appointed by G-d and assigned responsibility for its essential task, one that only he is uniquely qualified for.

Counting at the hands of man dooms the world to oblivion. As high as he goes, he is destined to falter. As the physical world cannot stand on its own, similarly, any material construct of humanity has substance only for a limited time.

But, G-d counts the Jewish people as well, in His world, when they are camped in the desert, surrounding the Mishkan which contain the Aron. There, in the king's palace, His Torah was first given, and it is to there we will someday return.

2

"....access to the Mishkan was restricted in the desert, as access to Har Sinai was restricted when the Honor of G-d was there...." (Ramban, Introduction to BaMidbar)

The sanctity of the Temple is, at its heart, the sanctity of Torah. For this reason, it is the Aron,

receptacle of the Luchos, that rests in the Kodesh HaKodashim, and it is from there that the sound of G-d's word emanates throughout creation.

Why is no man permitted to enter the Holy of Holies? Other than the Kohen Gadol on Yom HaKippurim, the holiest place on earth remains off-limits to mortal man.

This restriction, as the Ramban alludes, finds its parallel in the Torah itself. In the same way that man is forbidden to approach the Temple's inner sanctum, so too, our Sages restricted their students from the study of Kabbalah, the Torah's hidden secrets.

Why, in fact, is this so? Would not man benefit from contact with true holiness? Would he not be inspired by an expanded view of reality?

In this area, where so much confusion reigns, it is important that we separate truth from propaganda. If the Torah designates certain areas of life to a limited few, this is not a rabbinical grab for power, or an attempt to keep the masses at bay. Rather, the Torah's directives are always a pure reflection of an essential truth, one that cannot be denied.

If man is taught to stay away, it is because it is not his place.

It is G-d's.

In His world, G-d is One, and there is nothing else - "Ain Od MiL'Vado"

At the core of creation, the nucleus of life, rests the Aron HaKodesh. Though precisely measured, it takes no space, for the rule of natural law is suspended in the dimension of G-d.

Mortal man dare not approach, for there, he ceases to exist.

Here, G-d does the counting, and His number is One.

In the Kodesh HaKodashim the physical Torah has its place, and in a different realm, the consciousness of man, the study of Kabbalah reflects this very point, in man's mind and soul.

Just as man cannot approach G-d directly, for there, his very existence is subsumed before a deeper reality, similarly, the secrets of the hidden Torah reveal a world where man is consumed by heaven's fire.

It is not that man's mind is too puny to comprehend the brilliance of the Zohar, or his character too weak for his mind to stay pure. Rather, he has a natural fault.

Man thinks that he counts.

Torah study means more than the acquisition of certain ideas and information. It is the assimilation of a heavenly outlook that one must absorb within the fiber of his being. Until man is ready to sacrifice his humanity in the Temple of G-d, to follow G-d through a desert where no man survives, he is incapable of standing in the Holy of Holies, unfit to serve as a conduit to His people.

3

In addition to the populist trend that brings Kabbalah to the masses, one cannot help but notice sister movements that have recently gained momentum. I refer to the "Happy Minyan" - the singing, dancing, and merrymaking band, and varied other pretenders that share the same theme.

Put simply, their message is this: Every Jew is holy, and G-d is love, so let us rejoice with Him in ecstasy and rapture. Always included is a snide disclaimer: there's more to Judaism than just learning Torah.

Proud reference is given to one or another version of the following idea: though the snake in the Garden of Eden is often represented as the embodiment of evil, Kabbalah (and Chassidus) teach of a deeper truth, and from a hidden perspective, G-d is big enough to carry even evildoers under his wing. It is man's responsibility to rectify evil, sanctify the physical world, and utilize his physical desires in revealing G-d's love for his people.

All this is true, but completely off-base.

Surely, it is incumbent upon man to bring sanctity to life, but first, he must bring himself to the Mikdash.

If Kabbalistic ideas are bandied about freely, understood by anyone who can afford the price of admission, why is this element of Torah called Nistar, or Sod? Where is the secret?

The answer is this: Man may understand what he is reading, but only a limited few are on the spiritual level to embody such teachings. The average man may be capable of comprehending these ideas, but he can never reflect them in real life, for his desires are his, not G-d's.

For man to enter the Holy of Holies, he must be willing to sacrifice his very identity, surrendering his heart and desires before the omnipotent authority of G-d. It is not his boisterous singing and and parting that sanctifies his physical world, rather, it is the complete submission to a higher existence that transforms his Seudah and Avodah into an aspect of Divine service.

The physical world becomes holy, but only because it is no longer his.

He knows how to count, but he remebers only one number:

"Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad"

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