

# WHAT'S IN A NAME, AND HOLY PRIDE

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## What's in a Name, and Holy Pride<sup>1</sup>

Reporting the results of a census should be a straightforward affair, you would think. Not much room for drama. The Torah, though, offers us unending delights and surprises, and does not disappoint us even here. The difference between Hashem's directive to take the count in our *parshah* differs strikingly from its counterpart a short distance from here in *parshas* Pinchas. In our *parshah*, the command ends with the phrase "by number of the names." In the census reported later, the command comes to a screeching halt with what is here the penultimate phrase: "according to their father's house." What is insufficient about the later phraseology that needs further amplification here? And if the "number of the names" language is important, why delete it later on?

Accentuating individual names, suggests the Sforno, stresses the importance of the individual. (We know from considerable experience that names in Chumash are highly descriptive, distilling the unique essence of the named object.) The earlier of the two censuses of Bamidbar, the one in our *parshah*, counted people who had left Egypt in the great Exodus. These were elevated people, those many commentators refer to as "the generation of understanding." By the time we get to *parshas* Pinchas, the baton has been passed to a new group. The generation poised to enter the land of Israel was of lesser accomplishment and stature. They possessed great qualities born of their "families" and "father's houses," but individual greatness was not so widely distributed.

The Sforno's approach stands our perspective on the two generations on its head. The foibles and failings of the earlier generation are chronicled and detailed for us by the Torah. Regarding the latter generation, we hear no complaints. The *navi* pithily sums up their spiritual output in a single line that evokes our envy: "Yisrael served Hashem all the days of Yehoshua."<sup>2</sup> We are forced to conclude that the more frequent indiscretions of the earlier generation flowed from its greatness, not from its weakness! Because those who left Egypt lived on a more elevated plane, their *yetzer hora* was that much greater<sup>3</sup> as well. They were met with more numerous and more difficult challenges; their relatively infrequent but dramatic failures make up much of Chumash Bamidbar.

It was the second generation, the lesser of the two that succeeded at entering the land. In one regard, occupying a position of lesser stature has its advantages. Both Chida and the *Shalah HaKodesh* argue that the word Canaan and *hachna'ah* (submission) are related. In other words, the holiness of the Land has little tolerance for those who cannot or will not completely subjugate

themselves to its exacting demands. (*Toras Avos* notes the parallel language in "*tovah ha-aretz me'od me'od*," / the land is exceedingly good, and the epigram in *Pirkei Avos*, "*me'od meod hevei shefal ruach*" / exceedingly be of humble spirit. The overlap suggests that the land is exceedingly well suited to those who are of exceedingly humble spirit.) The generation that accepted the evil report of the spies was told by Hashem that they would be barred from entering the land. Their progeny, whose safety they had sought to protect, the "little ones" - they would enter the land. This is a double- entendre; it alludes to the fact that the next generation would be "little ones," not as great as their predecessors. Precisely because of this, they would be able to inherit Israel. The greatness of the first generation made it particularly hard for it to banish all ego needs and subjugate itself entirely to the land. The relative simplicity of the generation that followed allowed it to make the absolute commitment to the land; hence it was better positioned to take possession of it. (*Bais Avrohom* explained a passage in the Zohar<sup>4</sup> in a similar fashion, finding significance in simplicity where others would overlook it. The Zohar says, "One who is great, is small; one who is small is great." *Bais Avrohom* interprets this as referring in the first case to people who actually are great, and in the second to those who are in fact small. A person who is conscious of his greatness becomes smaller because of that consciousness. One who is small and realizes it, possesses an element of greatness! He fits the description in Tehilim<sup>5</sup> "a heart broken and humbled, O G-d, You will not despise.")

We could suggest an entirely different approach to answer the difficulty that results from the Sforzo's depiction of the generation that entered the Land as spiritually less significant than the one that left Egypt. Having at one point been mired in the spiritual morass of Egypt, the primary path in *avodah* of this generation was in purifying themselves of the *tumah* that surrounded them. Put more simply, they practiced *sur mera* - resisting and turning away from evil. The next generation's task was the other half of the matched set: *aseh tov* - actively performing good works. They were charged with entering the land, making it theirs, and building the *Beis Hamikdash*.

These two different paths of *avodah* require two very different mind sets. As *Beis Avrohom* writes elsewhere, the *sur mera* model requires vigorous self-confidence. Yosef HaTzadik - the finest example of resisting evil - ably demonstrates this. At the most dramatic point in his confrontation with Potiphar's wife, she "grabbed him *bevidgo*, by his garment."<sup>6</sup> The same letters (with altered vowelization) yield *bebegido*, in his rebellion. Yosef could be grabbed, was most vulnerable, by calling attention to his prior failures and misdemeanors. "Do you think you are perfect? You have rebelled against Hashem often enough through your failings! With such a record, how harmful do you think one more sin is going to be?"

Yosef's response blazes a trail for the rest of us. "There is no one greater in this house than I."<sup>7</sup> The *yetzer hora* often tells us that we are of little importance. We can despair of greatness; we don't have what it really takes. Another sin is a small thing, given our general worthlessness. We can resist such

a *yetzer hora* only by asserting our value and our worth. We gird ourselves with *ga'avah dekedushah*, with holy pride.<sup>8</sup> We must animate ourselves with the spirit of "his heart was elevated in the ways of Hashem."<sup>9</sup> We must assume the posture of a *chasid* and *yirei Hashem*, to whom such lowliness would be unthinkable.

The generation of the wilderness battled the battles of *sur mera*. To weather the counterattack of the *yetzer hora*, they needed to feel this holy pride. They had to cherish appropriate feelings of self-importance, not reject them. The Torah takes note of this by underscoring their individual importance in counting them "by number of the names."

The next generation did an about-face, and preoccupied itself with the production of good deeds. Borrowing from the gemara,<sup>10</sup> the more a person bends himself in submission and humility, the better. The path to positive *avodah* begins by muting one's sense of worth and importance.

Or as the Magid of Mezerich put it, "From the ground, you can't fall."

<sup>1</sup> Based on Nesivos Shalom pgs. 8-10

<sup>2</sup> Yehoshua 24:31

<sup>3</sup> Sukkah 52A

<sup>4</sup> Zohar 1:122B

<sup>5</sup> Tehilim 51:19

<sup>6</sup> Bereishis 39:12

<sup>7</sup> Bereishis 39:9. Note that in the text, Yosef's position is voiced several verses before Potiphar's wife makes her final seduction attempt.

<sup>8</sup> This concept figures importantly in the writings of both Rav Kook zt"l and his talmid Rav Hutner zt"l.

<sup>9</sup> Divrei Hayamim 2 17:6

<sup>10</sup> Rosh Hashanah 26B