

WHEN DIGNITY REALLY COUNTS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d told Moshe, "When you take a count of the Israelites to determine their number, each one should be counted by giving an atonement offering for his life. In this way, they will not be stricken by the plague when they are counted ... " (Shemos 30:11)

These are the introductory words of this week's parsha. G-d gave Moshe instructions as to how to take a census of the Jewish people, a halacha that is in effect even today. This is why it is often a question to ask a rabbi when the government tries to count the number of its citizens (including Jews) by way of census. For the non-Jew, such a census may be a simple fact of living in a civilized society; for the Jew, it is not so simple, since, as the Torah warns, counting Jews the wrong way can result in a devastating plague (as King David found out in his own day; Shmuel 2:24:10).

Even a simple counting of Jews, like to know if a minyan has arrived, means not counting the people directly (some count the shirts, others count words of a verse that has ten words, etc.). The question is, what does counting individual Jews have to do with causing a deathly plague?

Rashi, commenting on this verse, answers the question: The counting empowers the ayin hara (evil eye). Indeed, the Talmud states outright:

Blessing is only found on that which is hidden from the eye ... And not on that which is weighed, measured, and counted ... (Ta'anis 8b)

We already discussed the concept of ayin hara from one vantage point in Parashas VeYechi (5758). However, the addition of the concept of "blessing" alludes to another dimension of this discussion, and alludes to some very deep and central concepts.

For example, the concept of a blessing is the idea of increasement (which is why the word "brocha" begins with the letter bais, which represents the number "two"). Sometimes G-d wishes to increase our lot in life miraculously, without our being directly involved (as in the case when someone earns a "bonus" at work). However, He also looks to work "undercover," only performing revealed miracles on special occasions. Therefore, if someone checks his bank account and watches it to the penny, then how can G-d increase the amount without it being known to the individual that a miracle has occurred? According to this idea, counting the money closes it off from such miraculous

increasement.

Another way of looking at this idea is in a broader, more universal sense. Many people seem to have this innate desire to unify mankind, one way or another. People talk about "universal brotherhood" and similar ideas. Though their methods for achieving this ultimate state of humankind may be "off the wall," the notion itself is rooted deep within the esoteric teachings of Torah.

Kabballah talks about how everything can be traced back to a single source, G-d Himself. As the light of G-d "leaves" and "moves away" from G-d, it becomes more physical. The more physical the light becomes, the more "complex" it becomes, until, eventually, it results in so many different kinds and species, the number of which is beyond comprehension.

Eventually, the Kabballists explain, as history moves toward the 6,000th year (and beyond), creation will naturally re-unify with G-d once again to such a degree that many of the differences that interfere with such sublime unity will completely disappear. This is what the Talmud means which it says that "the only difference between this side of history and that of Moshiach's is that in the latter, no nation will oppress another" (Brochos 34b).

However, though the Talmud downplays this difference, we know full well that it is a major difference. First of all, we have never come close to achieving this on our own. Secondly, the same traits that facilitate such international brotherhood, such as contentment with one's portion and love for others, are the same traits that allow a person to rise above pettiness and achieve a high state of mental peace.

On the other hand, it is in the world of physicality and complex fragmentation that chaos (entropy) has its impact. The leads to spiritual decay, which is the direct cause of physical decay, including plagues.

Weighing, measuring, and counting all are aspects of this physicality. The expression "Stand up and be counted" might as well say, "Stand out and be counted," since counting something makes something separate from everything else around it, a fragment of the whole. It is excessive individuality that interferes with the accomplishment of unity with others; the same thing is true of that which is measured and weighed.

According to Kabballah, the unification of creation has been taking place ever since the first days of creation-on a spiritual level; it is our job to try to achieve this on a physical plain. By avoiding counting individual Jews, and then counting them only by a half-shekel piece (which implies that no one stands alone, but is only a piece of the whole), the census of the Jewish people was a unique way to teach this important message, and to implement it.

Shabbos Day:

G-d said to Moshe, "Carve out two tablets for yourself, just like the first ones ... " (Shemos 34:1)

Well, not exactly. The first set of Ten Commandments that Moshe had descended with at the time of the golden calf had not only been inscribed by G-d, but the Tablets themselves had been carved out by G-d as well. Though the "replacement" tablets were also going to be inscribed by G-d, the actual carving out of the tablets, it seemed, was to be Moshe's doing.

How much of a difference did this make? The difference was as great as that between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil-all the difference in the world!

This is because G-d's making of the First Tablets represented their having emanated from a higher source, one which is outside the realm of evil. Embodied in these tablets was the Hidden Light of creation, which shone briefly during the six days of creation, and then was hidden again after Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Bringing the First Tablets down from heaven was the same as returning this supernal light to physical creation. When these tablets were broken because of the sin of the golden calf, the light returned to its "hiding place."

And though Moshe's prayer on behalf of the Jewish nation after the incident was enough to avoid Divine wrath, it had not been enough to return the First Tablets and the light revealed through them. Instead, Moshe was told to create new tablets from the physical world itself, tablets which could not shine with this holy light, and therefore were not above the world of evil. For this reason, the Second Tablets were considered to be on the level of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

In fact, had the Jewish people not transgressed with the golden calf (which meant not stopping the Erev Rav from constructing it), Torah would have been revealed to everyone on the most sublime level from the time it was given. This was because all of creation would have been elevated back to the level it had been on before Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It was only the episode of the golden calf that resulted in a Torah that is hidden behind words that do not directly reveal their Divine wisdom, demanding instead that we labor intellectually and spiritually to learn, comprehend, and retain Torah (Eiruvim 54a).

This difference was also alluded to by the fact that the First Tablets contained 17 less words than the Second Tablets (Ba'al HaTurim, Parashas Aikev). This can be understood to mean that, as a result of the golden calf and the ensuing "physicalization" of the Jewish nation, it took more words to express the same lofty concepts found on the First Tablets. As a result, says the Pri Tzaddik (Parashas Aikev, 2), we are forced to exert more energy to draw out the levels of meaning meant to be available to us through Torah.

On the other hand, though the holy letters of the First Tablets flew back to heaven, and the tablets themselves had been reduced to dust, still, they had been placed inside the Aron HaKodesh. Furthermore, says the Pri Tzaddik, the number 17 is also the gematria of the Hebrew word "tov" (tes,

vav, bais, or, 9+6+2), which is first used in the Torah when referring to the Hidden Light of creation (and later to the birth of Moshe).

What does this mean? It means that, even though we are starting off on a much lower spiritual level than we would have had we been able to possess the First Tablets, still, there is a connection, albeit a tenuous one, to the light of the First Tablets. This is why the rabbis could teach with confidence:

The Tablets were the work of G-d and the writing was that of G-d engraved (charus) on the Tablets. Don't read charus (engraved), but cheirus (freedom), for there is no one freer than one who studies the Torah. (Pirke Avos, 6:2)

Clearly this statement refers to the tablets carved by G-d-the First Tablets. Then what relevance does this post-Second Temple teaching have to us?

The answer is, the Second Tablets were not the replacement for the First Tablets, but a medium through which to access them. Just as seeing glasses act as a corrective device for one whose vision has become impaired, so too did the Second Tablets act as a "corrective device" to help us recover what was lost when Moshe broke the First Tablets.

And this is precisely what we try to achieve every time we sit down to learn Torah.

Seudos Shlishi:

G-d said to Moshe, "I have chosen Betzalel son of Uri son of Chur of the tribe of Yehudah, by name. I have filled him with Divine spirit, with wisdom, understanding and knowledge ... " (Shemos 31:1)

It is one thing to be an architect; it is something altogether different to be G-d's architect in the building of the Mishkan, a miniature version of the G-d's own creation, the world itself. What made Betzalel so special? The Talmud explains:

Betzalel was named as an indication of his wisdom. When The Holy One, Blessed is He, told Moshe, "Tell Betzalel to make Me a Mishkan, an Aron, and implements," Moshe switched the order and said, "an Aron, implements, and a Mishkan." He [Betzalel] asked him, "Moshe Rabbeinu, is it not the way of the world to first build a house and then after put the vessels into it? And yet, you are telling me to first make the Aron and the implements! Where shall I put them?" He answered him, "[You're right!] That's how The Holy One, Blessed be He, told me to do it ... Make a Mishkan, an Aron, and then the implements. Perhaps you were in the shadow of G-d (b'ztel E"l)?" (Brochos 55a)

But, as if that genius wasn't enough, the Talmud adds:

... Betzalel knew how to combine the letters [of the Aleph-Bais] that were used to make heaven and earth.

However, as the Talmud concludes, that was wisdom that came from G-d. Nevertheless, it was Betzalel's initial wisdom that prompted the gift of Divine understanding, for, as the Talmud concludes, G-d gives wisdom to the wise.

Perhaps the original verse itself indicates another aspect of Betzalel's greatness and reason for being chosen from amongst millions of people, when it mentions the name of Betzalel's grandfather and tribe (his father's name can be considered an identifying family name).

Who was Chur?

There is a disagreement in the midrash as to whether Chur was Miriam's (Moshe's sister) husband or son. Regardless, Chur had illustrious ancestry: Yehudah, Peretz, Chetzron and Kaleiv. His was the line through which the kingship of Israel passed on the way to King David, and eventually Moshiach.

According to the midrash, Chur died trying to prevent the worship of the golden calf (Sanhedrin 7a). His effort did nothing to stop the Erev Rav from executing their will and dragging the entire nation down the road to Divine annihilation, since the mob simply stoned Chur to death. However, in the end, it was his grandson that was chosen to build the Mishkan, for the very dedication to G-d and wisdom Chur obviously possessed had been passed down to Betzalel, his grandson.

However, Chur's own trait was not unique to him, but to his entire tribe. When Yehudah was faced with the choice of "facing the music" and taking responsibility for unknowingly impregnating his daughter-in-law, Tamar, or letting her die accused of improper behavior, Yehudah "took the wrap" (as they say). For this reason, Yehudah's own father, Ya'akov Avinu, on his deathbed not only praised Yehudah, but he cited that event as the basis for the consensus of his right to the Jewish throne.

Why should this trait play such a central role in building the kingdom of the Jewish people? Because being "modeh" (admitting) to truth without concern for personal humiliation reveals a commitment to a higher level of truth, G-d's truth. This is a trait that most kings of the past barely even grappled with, yet, it is the root of the Jewish Malchus. It was also Chur's and Betzalel's spiritual inheritance ... the foundation upon which the Mishkan would eventually stand.

Melave Malkah:

The commentators "go to town" on the name Amalek, the ancestor of Haman, each one looking for another clue to the essence of Amalek's inherent evil. One such "drush" is "amull-kuf" (ayin, mem, lamed-kuf), made up of Amalek's letters of his name, which means "work of a monkey."

There are many ways to understand this, but one very relevant way is to understand that Amalek comes to reduce human dignity. Man was made in the "image of G-d," which was to be our sense of loftiness, and to separate us from the animal world that, physically, can come very close to what we

look like and do. The question many still pose: Is man imbued with a holy soul, or only some hitherto unexplained form of consciousness and self-awareness ... Is he a monkey, or something altogether different (no matter how well-trained a chimpanzee can be)?

On the surface, such questions seem self-honest. After all, what fulfillment-seeking human being doesn't want to better understand his origin, be it physical, spiritual, or both? Science demands that we ask questions-all the questions-even if they reflect negatively on the stature of man.

No, says the Torah, that is not so. The Torah states outright that man did not descend from apes, but was formed from the dust of the ground (as were the animals), and then imbued with a holy, godly soul (unlike the animals). If you want to ask a scientific question, such as, "How do we know Torah is true, and that G-d gave it at Sinai?" and then research the answer, that is an important step along the way to finding G-d, a key to developing a keen sense of human dignity.

However, to dismiss the Torah out-of-hand and ask questions like, "Why does the monkey look so familiar to us, and act so human? Can it be ... ?"

Questions such as those are the work of Amalek, of the "monkey" himself. Why? Because, ultimately, the goal of Amaleks, and of Hamans, and of Hitlers, is to sever man's connection to G-d. The Amalekian approach is one that attacks the relationship of man to G-d by reducing man's own sense of godliness. Does it really make a difference, in the long run, whether you call man descended from monkeys, or whether you make him build golden calves, or more recently, stand, completely disgraced and immodest in front of one another and cruel murderers (one can't help but wonder if allowing the public to view pictures of such scenes doesn't, in fact, perpetuate this deep sense of shame and humiliation)?

(After all, Hitler, may his name and memory be erased, was a self-professed Social-Darwinist, who believed whole-heartedly in the philosophy of "survival of the fittest." One of his chief complaints against the Jewish people was that they corrupted the natural course of mankind, by teaching that the strong must help the weak survive.)

In spite of all the sophisticated caveats, rationalizations, and mention of lofty goals, is not the result the same? Little or no respect for mankind, a reduced sense of social responsibility, and above and beyond all else, a distancing of man from G-d.

Purim celebrates the reversal of this trend. It comes to "lift the heads" of mankind (to borrow the language of the first verse of this week's parsha), to defeat the Hamans of history by restoring our sense of Elokus (godliness). This is why, according to the Rambam, there is an special mitzvah of helping out the poor on Purim, and why one who does is compared to G-d Himself. For, when one helps out a downhearted person, they restore his hope, just as G-d did to the Jews of Persia in Haman's time.

Perhaps this is why Purim has such potential to reduce human dignity through alcohol-abuse. It is to

make us conscious of our ability to act below our godly standard, so that we can instead focus on increasing our sense of self-dignity, and in doing so, draw down the light from Above, which is just waiting to bring peace on earth to all mankind. Purim comes to make us confront the issue of self-dignity, of our godliness, and to commit ourselves to grow in this direction, in spite of the pressure from without and from within to act like a "monkey."

On that note, I wish you a wonderful Purim, filled with joy and raised spirits (you know what I mean), and even more enlightened Shabbos than before.

A Freilechen Purim,
Shabbat Shalom.

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