

BAMIDBAR: WHO COUNTS MOST

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Take the sum of all the congregation of the Children of Israel . . . (Bamidbar 1:2)

The very word "desert" conjures up images of lots of very dry sand, scorching heat, a tremendous lack of water, and therefore, very dangerous conditions. Yet, the Jewish people spent 40 years in the desert and rarely did they complain about such circumstances. Even when they complained about a lack of water it was before they were even thirsty.

This is because in reality, the Jewish camp was a traveling oasis. Bread fell from the sky, special clouds plowed the desert and protected them from deadly elements, the light of God led them on their journey, and a mystical well followed them everything they went. Even their clothes did not need cleaning or repair. Their environment had been more than ideal.

This situation was not only while the Jewish people traveled in the desert. It is the situation of the Jewish people as they travel through history. History is a desert for the descendants of Ya'akov, and protection from its elements is purely by the grace of God then, and now:

The whole world is sustained by [God's] charity. (Brochos 17a)

This may not be so obvious now, but it was during the Holocaust, and the pogroms of Europe, and before that the Crusades, and before that, Roman persecution, and before that, Greek persecution, etc. For over a thousand years survival was not something a Jew took for granted. For over a thousand years, Jews knew they survived by the grace of God.

I'm sure it has been pointed out many times before, but it is far more than ironic that the Torah makes a big deal about counting the Jews, and that the Holocaust did as well. Tattooed numbers became synonymous with the horrors of the Holocaust, just as they are synonymous with God's love of the Jewish people in the Torah, as Rashi explains.

Though the two numberings seem worlds apart, they really are quite connected. This is the way Hashgochah Pratis works: an energy meant for the sake of redemption left unused is "kidnapped" by the realm of impurity for anti-redemption purposes. There was something about the numbering of Jews during the Holocaust that had been intended for a redemption-oriented goal, was left unused, and was turned against the Jews instead.

What that positive purpose was meant to be is anyone's guess now. Unless, that is, it still resulted in its intended goal, only through an evil and deadly manner.

A clue might be in this week's parshah, regarding which it says:

Because they were dear to Him, He counted them often. When they left Egypt, He counted them (Shemos 12:37); when [many] fell because [of the sin] of the golden calf, He counted them to know the number of the survivors (Shemos 32:28); when He came to cause His Divine Presence to rest among them, He counted them. On the first of Nissan, the Mishkan was erected, and on the first of Iyar, He counted them. (Rashi, Bamidbar 1:1)

According to this explanation, God constantly counts the Jewish people because they are dear to Him. People who love money constantly count it, even if they already know how much they have. God values the Jewish people, so He counts them even though He already knows how many they are.

This explains why God counted the Jewish people on the way out of Egypt. He wanted to make sure, so-to-speak, everyone who was meant to leave in fact did, and that not one Jew was left behind. It also explains why God counted the Jews after the incident of the golden calf. Almost three thousand Jews had died as a result of Divine retribution for the sin, so God wanted to see, so-to-speak, how many remained.

What this does not explain is why God counted the Jews when it came time for his Presence to dwell on the nation, or why He counted them when the Mishkan was erected. What did these events have to do with how many Jews were around at the time? Why did God choose to express His love of the people by counting them at these times as well? Nothing had been lost, only gained.

Counting has two different types of impact. With respect to the Machtzis HaShekel, the Half-Shekel that was given to count the Jewish people in the desert, it was to tell each Jew that he is part of whole. He should never consider him to be overly individual, or set himself apart from the rest of the nation. Achdus, Jewish unity should be a stronger value than Jewish independence.

That is the message for the person who considers himself to be too unique from the rest of the Jewish nation. For the person who feels apart from the nation, but not by choice, there is a different message in counting. He wants to belong, but feels left out for some reason or another. His own lack of self-esteem, or just humility, makes him question his right to belong to an illustrious group.

For such people, counting is inclusive. For the person who longs to be only one of a collective whole, counting does exactly this for them. It says to them, "From God's perspective, you are no different than the next Jew, and He wishes to include you in what has been achieved with the rest of the nation."

The emphasis on counting the Jewish people in the Holocaust had both aspects to it. On one hand, the losses were unimaginable, on such a scale as to make one believe their death didn't matter, that their loss would be felt by no one. It could be years before anyone even knew they were gone, or how they died.

Counting the Jews said, "I am God, and you are My people. I take note of each and everyone of you, and the loss of each of you will be noticed and felt by Me. I know who you are, where you are, what you have gone through, and what you have earned as a result in terms of eternal reward."

Counting the Jews during the Holocaust also said, "This deadly and dark period in history will lead to something important and positive. It will be an important turning point in Jewish history and a crucial step towards the Final Redemption. Though your fellow man treats you as subhuman and as if you have no worth, I treat you just the opposite. Some of you will die, and some of you will survive. But all of you have a part in this threshold to redemption. You will share in its benefits in both this world and the eternal one."

It doesn't matter that the Nazis chose to number the Jews for evil purposes. It doesn't make a difference to the message that their obsession for meticulousness was the reason for going to the trouble of tattooing every Jew. During times of the "desert," that is, in exile, God often uses the distorted intentions of people to accomplish His holy acts.

Not only this, but though the Nazis were defeated and disappeared from life, the numbers did not. They continued on long after the Jews were liberated and had a chance to rebuild their lives elsewhere. How many survivors could be seen later enjoying life, but with a distinct number still quite visible on their arms?

If they had known at the time what it meant and what it would later mean, the Nazis probably would have kept track of the Jews in a less obvious manner. During the Holocaust, the numbers represented Jewish vulnerability and worthlessness to the rest of mankind. After the Holocaust, the same numbers testified to the resilience of the Jewish nation, and the love of their Creator for them.

Of course, many did not view their survival that way. The numbers on their arms were a horrible reminder of what had once occurred, what God had allowed to happen. When they slept they had nightmares, and while awake, the number was a nightmare as well. They could not associate it with anything positive, and certainly not with love from God.

Such people have been called "Holy Disbelievers." They lived through hell, and then some. They had been pushed to psychological limits that, in the eyes of many, excuses them from their agnostic and even atheistic behavior.

The numbers on their arms say, "Even still, I include you. You are one of my loved ones, and though you cannot see or understand that today, you will one day. I will make a point of it."

"Stand up and be counted" has a different meaning for a Jew. It doesn't just mean, state your support for something. It means being part of a people whose God never loses track of a single member, loving them all and keeping track of them now, and forever.