

THE MOST PRECIOUS COMMODITY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

A further count of the Jewish people is recorded for us in this week's parsha. Though the numbers match almost exactly to the count that was reported in the at the beginning of the book of Bamidbar, the Torah nevertheless goes through it again in great detail and with precision. All of the commentators to the Torah have struggled to find meaning in this counting of Israel once again.

Equally troubling is the fact that over the decades of Israel's sojourn in the desert no material change in the amount occurred. It seems that the Torah, early on, wished to inform us of the few in number that would characterize the Jewish people throughout its millennia long history.

The Jewish people, over the last seventy-five years, have yet to make up the numbers it lost during the Holocaust. The count in this week's parsha illustrates the struggle of the Jewish people to survive demographically. God promised us that we would be the smallest in numbers of all peoples and at the same time He ordained us to build families and guarantee our existence demographically from one generation to the next.

The low birth rate and the high number of intermarriages among many sections of Jewish society are harmful to our continued existence. Yet the high birth rate and demographic growth within the religiously observant Jewish communities in Israel and worldwide offer us a window of hope and optimism. The simple truth is that Judaism cannot survive without there being Jews. Our task is to provide those necessary individual Jews to the Jewish nation as a whole.

The Torah counts people. Except for the necessary public accounting of the wealth collected and spent on the Mishkan construction and its artifacts, and the priestly vestments, we do not find another detailed count of money or wealth in the Torah. People are the most important items in Jewish life. And even people are never counted directly - only indirectly through coins, sheep, etc. - for what number can truly encompass the value and quality of an individual person.

There is a tendency in the world to count wealth, to see wealth as the most important commodity in national or personal lives. I recall that as a rabbi in Miami Beach decades ago I witnessed hundreds of retired people queuing up in front of the local banks four times a year to have their interest dividend recorded in their savings account passbook.

As is usual, there were people who pushed and shoved and attempted to force their way to the head of the line. People were expendable to these pushers and shovers - the physical count of money, which their savings passbook represented to them, prevailed over simple basic human consideration for other people.

Not so in the view of the Torah. For us people count the most. From the Torah's repetitive counting of the Jewish people, we become aware that people, for us, are truly the most precious commodity. With this in mind we certainly should strive to act accordingly, based upon the values that the Torah has implanted within the Jewish people over the ages.

Shabat shalom,

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com