

# THE BOOK OF NUMBERS TEACHES US A LESSON IN COUNTING

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

## Parshas Bamidbar

### The Book of Numbers Teaches Us A Lesson in Counting

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 726, - Returning Pidyon HaBen Money. Good Shabbos!*

In Rabbinic literature, the book of Bamidbar is referred to as the book of censuses (Sefer haPekudim), which is no doubt roughly equivalent to the common English name for the book - the Book of Numbers. In this week's parsha, there is a counting at the beginning of their sojourn in the Wilderness and there is another counting in Parshas Pinchas, towards the end of their sojourn in the Wilderness.

The command to count the people is formulated as follows: "Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers' house, BY NUMBER OF THE NAMES, every male according to their head count." [Bamidbar 1:2]. The expression "b'mispar sheimos" [by number of the names] is somewhat peculiar. What does it really mean? Beyond that, it seems like it is an oxymoron. The term "number" and "names" are almost mutually exclusive. When we talk about numbers we imply anonymity. (We hear all the time: "I don't really count for anything I am just a number!") The word "names" has the exact opposite connotation. A name gives a person singularity and a quality of being special - more than just a number!

Here we are told to count the Jewish people "by the number of their names". Which is it - was the census concerned with the overall numbers (the "klal") or was the census interested in the individual names (the "p'rat")?

Rav Mordechai Gifter, of blessed memory, writes that numbers by their very definition are finite. Stating a number, one quantifies an item such that the quantity is no more and no less than the number stated. A human being, by his very definition, is not finite in this sense. He has a soul and strengths, and characteristics. He has unlimited potential to grow and expand his capabilities. Trying to put a number on an individual limits him and restricts his ability to reach untold heights. Therefore, when we speak of a "minyan" we are not speaking of a "mispar" [a number]. We cannot just "count" Jews. When we enumerate people and treat them as numbers we in effect say they are defined and



limited. This is certainly not the way the Almighty wants us to view the Jewish people.

How does one get around this problem? If it is so detrimental to put a number on the individuals within Klal Yisrael, how can one take a census of the Jewish people? For this reason, Rav Gifter writes, the Jewish census never involved "the counting of noses". Intermediate items (such as half-shekel coins, as specified in Parshas Ki Tisa) were always utilized to avoid the problem of counting the people by number. The message is the same - the Jewish people are not finite ('mugbal'). We may be finite in terms of our bodies, but in terms of our souls we are infinite.

In fact, when Dovid HaMelech [King David] decided to count Klal Yisraela, and he counted them directly (as is recorded at the end of the book of Shmuel), a terrible plague resulted. The lesson of that - says Rav Gifter - is that when people are viewed as finite rather than as individuals with unlimited potential, the result is destruction. The indirect method of taking a Jewish census, on the other hand, is symbolic of the infinite measure and infinite potential of each person counted within that census.

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