

## Parshas Bamidbar

# Counting: Revealing Our Essential Identity

*In this week’s parsha G-d instructs that the Jewish people be counted. Rashi explains the purpose for the three different reckonings of the Jewish people found in the Torah. This Sichva analyzes the intent of Rashi’s commentary and brings out the spiritual significance of counting on each of these occasions.*

Parshas Bamidbar begins with a reckoning of the Jewish people. The verse tells us:

### Text 1

The Lord spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting on the first day of the second month, in the second year after the exodus from the land of Egypt, saying: “Take the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by families following their fathers' houses; a head count of every male according to the number of their names. From 20 years old and upwards, all who are fit to go out to the army in Israel, you shall count them by their legions; you and Aharon.”

*Bamidbar 1:1-3*

The sections of the Torah that are read on each particular week are not merely random, but they contain a special connection to the time in which they are read. This concept can be understood through the following explanation:

### Text 2

Everything has an appointed season, and there is a time for every matter. Because it is for sure that the cycle of holidays of the entire year...all

have a connection to the *parsha* that they fall out on, for all is from the hand of G-d, for us to understand.

*Shnei Luchos HaBris, Torah Shebichsav, Vayeishev*

Being that the *parsha* of Bamidbar is usually read on the Shabbos a week prior to the holiday of Shavuot—the time of the giving of the Torah—it is understood that the counting of the Jewish people contains a correlation to the giving of the Torah.

### Why count?

On the above verse, Rashi explains the reason that the Jewish People were counted:

### Text 3

Because they were dear to Him, He counts them constantly. 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 Nisan, the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) was erected, and on the first of Iyar, He counted them.

*Rashi, Bamidbar 1:1*

Rashi explains that because the Jewish people are precious to the Almighty, he therefore constantly counts them. Yet, Rashi's explanation as to why the Jewish people were counted is seemingly inadequate in our verse, for the following reasons:

1. The purpose of counting precious things is because the counter desires to know the quantity. However, the Holy One, Blessed be He knows how many Jews there are, even without tallying their numbers. If so, why did G-d command Moshe and Aharon to take a reckoning of the Jewish people?
2. Rashi explains that this present count is in context with the construction of the *Mishkan*, as he states, "On the first of Nisan, the *Mishkan* was erected, and on the first of Iyar, He counted them." If that is indeed the case, why was the counting delayed an entire month, instead of conducting the tally on the first of Nisan itself or immediately following?
3. The verse says that this reckoning was performed by both Moshe and Aharon, as it states, "you shall count them by their legions you and Aharon." Why was it important that this counting be carried out through both Moshe and Aharon, when, by the other times that Israel was counted this was not the case? (When the Jewish people were counted upon the exodus from Egypt, the verse does not give any specific mention of who counted them; after the sin of the golden calf, the verse says<sup>1</sup>, "The Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: "When you take the sum of the children of Israel etc.," meaning to say, that only Moshe counted them. Here, however, the verse

relates that both Moshe and Aharon should be involved.)

### Equal value

The explanation of this from a spiritual perspective is as follows:

One of the elements in performing a count is that all the particular parts are counted *equally*. The greatest of the great is not given a value *more* than one, and the lowest of the low is not given a value *less* than one. They are both equally assigned one number.

Likewise, the preciousness of the Jewish people that is expressed through counting them is not in regard to the *specific* qualities of Israel—in which there is a varying range—but concerning their *essential Jewishness*, where they are all equal.

This idea resolves the first of the above questions: It is because this spark of Jewishness is hidden (i.e. on a level above what is usually apparent) that G-d instructed that the Jewish people be counted, although He obviously knew their number prior to counting them. Through counting the Jewish people, this essential quality was thus expressed and brought out into the open.

This idea can be observed from Rashi's commentary on the first counting, when G-d enumerated the names of each of Yaakov's sons, all of whose families came out of the land of Egypt.

### Text 4

Although [G-d] counted them in their lifetime by their names (Gen. 46:8-27), He counted them again after their death, to make it known how precious they are.

*Rashi, Shemos 1:1*

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<sup>1</sup> Shemos 30:11-12.

As seen from Rashi's words, the counting was "to make it known," i.e., it was in order to *reveal* a quality which was normally hidden within the Jewish people. When the Jewish people are each counted as one, it reveals their G-dly spark which is usually in a concealed state.

### Revealing the spark

Equipped with this understanding, a peculiar statement found in Rashi's commentary can be understood as well.

When Rashi explains why the Jewish people are counted, he says that because they are precious, "He counts them constantly."

This terminology though, seems inaccurate.

While true, that this was the third time that Israel was counted in a three-year span, nonetheless, from that point on, the Jewish people were not counted for another 38 years! Furthermore, from the time of the last counting during the erection of the *Mishkan* until our present time, the Jewish people were counted quite seldom—in fact, the Medrash<sup>2</sup> states that the Jewish people were counted only 10 times total since then.

That being the case, what does Rashi mean by his words when he says that G-d "counts them constantly?"

While one may explain simply, that Rashi's intention in the word "constantly" (which is literally stated with the Hebrew words, "*b'chol sha-ah*" - at all times) is not intended in its literal sense to mean "regularly," but rather is stating that G-d counts Israel at each exceptional situation. This explanation though, does not fit so accurately with the word "constantly."

However, after understanding the spiritual significance of G-d's counting, the intention of this word is understood as well.

Being that the purpose of counting the Jewish people was in order to *reveal* their essential Jewishness, it can be explained that Rashi's intention with the word "constantly" is to express that the revelation of this essential quality is such that it *affects* the individual *constantly*. Because the Jewish people were counted by G-d, they are constantly under the effect of their G-dly spark.

By way of example, one may reason that if a Jew would be in a situation of forced idol worship, G-d forbid, he would make the following assessment: Since there is nothing that stands in way of *teshuvah* (repentance) and being that as a result of proper *teshuvah*, all traces of sin are completely removed, it is not the end of the world to sin and to then repent.

Yet we see that this is not the case. When a Jew is placed in a situation of serving idolatry on penalty of death, he would choose to sacrifice his life rather than denying G-d's existence—even momentarily.

The reason for this is due to the G-dly spark within him, which does not wish to be disconnected from G-d, even for an instant. In Chassidic thought this concept is explained as follows:

#### Text 5

Nonetheless, every Jew is prepared and ready to suffer martyrdom for the sanctification of G-d's Name, and will not commit an idolatrous act even temporarily, with the intention of repenting afterwards. This is because of the divine light which is clothed in his soul, as

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<sup>2</sup> Tanchuma, Tisa 9

explained above; which does not come within the realm of time at all, but transcends it, having rule and dominion over it, as is known.

*Tanya, Ch. 25*

It is because this quintessential part of one's soul transcends time, that on this level, there is no difference between being separated from G-d for one moment or for an extended period. A Jewish person therefore chooses to give up his life rather than experience a momentary separation through, G-d forbid, denying G-d's existence in the act of idol worship.

This is Rashi's intention in the words, "He counts them constantly." Counting the Jewish people and thereby revealing the spark of G-dliness inherent within them, causes each Jew to be affected by his true identity *continually*, in that he refuses to be separate from G-d, even for a single instant (although he knows he can repent afterwards).

### Three ways

Based on what has been explained, the difference between the three times the Jewish people were counted can be appreciated.

The quintessential Jewish spark is revealed in general, in three ways:

- A) Even after this spark is revealed to the extent that the individual is ready to sacrifice his life, the person's regular personality is not changed.

This is similar to the idea explained in Tanya concerning every individual's preparedness to sanctify his life, even a person whom may be considered the lowest of the low.

### Text 6

Therefore even lowest of low and the transgressors of the Israelites, in the majority of cases sacrifice their lives for the sanctity of G-d's Name and suffer harsh torture rather than deny the one G-d, although they be boors and illiterate and ignorant of G-d's greatness. [For] whatever little knowledge they do possess, they do not delve therein at all, [and so] they do not give up their lives by reason of any knowledge and contemplation of G-d. Rather [do they suffer martyrdom] without any knowledge and reflection, but as if it were absolutely impossible to renounce the one G-d; and without any reason or hesitation whatever.

*Tanya, Ch. 18*

Although true that each and every Jew will sanctify themselves for G-d, even when this person sacrifices his life, he is called the "lowest of the low." The reason for this is, because concerning other sins, he would still be likely to transgress G-d's will at that very moment.

- B) The essence of his Jewishness affects the rest of his attributes. It changes the way he thinks, acts etc., until he becomes a G-dly individual. Yet, although it does influence him, it is felt in a manner of that which comes from outside of his intellect and which is superimposed upon it.
- C) This quintessential Jewish spark permeates his entire identity to the point that his intellect itself is one with this reality and demands that which the essence of his soul desires.

### Three experiences

These three levels of revelation correlate to the three separate times that G-d counted the Jewish people:

- A) **By the exodus from Egypt:** During this climactic event, the Jewish people had simple faith in G-d. The Prophet Yirmiyahu poetically expresses this trust in G-d:

### Text 7

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying: "Go and call out in the ears of Jerusalem, saying: 'So said the Lord: I remember to you the loving-kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following Me in the desert, in a land not sown.'"

*Yirmiyahu 2:1-2*

This faith of the Jewish people however, did not permeate their internal identity.

It is explained in Chassidic thought, that although the Jewish people left Egypt, at that time, they were still attached to the negativity that was there:

### Text 8

This [release of the soul from her exile in the body] is in the nature of the "Exodus from Egypt," in connection with which it is written, "The people had fled." At first sight it is strange that it should have happened in this way. For had Pharaoh been requested to liberate them forever, would he not have been compelled to let them go? But because the evil in the souls of the Israelites was still in its strength in the left part— for not until the Giving of the Torah did their impurity cease— yet their aim and desire was to free their divine souls from the exile of the *sitra achra*, which is the "Defilement of Egypt," and cleave to Him, blessed be He.

*Tanya, Ch. 31*

This event was expressive of the first level of revelation, where although the G-dly spark is revealed, it does not affect the person himself.

- B) **Before the erection of the Tabernacle:** after the acceptance of repentance for the Golden Calf the Jewish people built the *mishkan*. The building of the *Mishkan* was for the purpose of the Divine Presence residing amongst the Jewish people, as G-d instructed:

### Text 9

And they shall make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in them.

*Shemos 25:8*

It was because G-d's desire was for His presence to be expressed internally in the Jewish people, that the Jewish people were counted again. This counting revealed the essence of their soul to a degree that it affected their actual being, so that G-d could then "dwell in them."

- C) **After the erection of the Tabernacle:** After Israel had already involved themselves in the service of the Temple, they became a dwelling place for G-d in their own right.

At this point, not only were they a receptacle for G-dliness because of a *superimposed* revelation of G-dliness, but through their service of G-d, they themselves became a vessel for that expression. At this point, not only were they a receptacle for G-dliness because of a *superimposed* revelation of G-dliness, but through their service of G-d, they themselves became a vessel for that expression.

### Answering the questions

The above sheds light on the reason that the third counting of Israel, mentioned in our *parsha*, was on the first day of the month of *Iyar*—a month after the construction of the *Mishkan*—as well providing insight as to the purpose of Aharon participating in this count, although he did not participate in other counting's.

The difference between the month of Nisan and *Iyar* is as follows:

Nisan is the month of the exodus from Egypt and is expressive of the way that G-d relates to the Jewish people *without* their own effort. *Iyar*, on the other hand, is the month in which every day contains the *mitzvah* of the counting the *Omer*—expressive of the way that the Jewish people refine themselves on their own accord.

Similarly, Moshe was considered the one who drew G-dliness down to the Jewish people, while Aharon was the one that drew the Jewish people towards G-d.

It was because this last accounting of the Jewish people was for the purpose revealing the spark of G-dliness in a manner that permeated their very being, (and not only in a way that was superimposed on their identity) did this reckoning need to be performed through both Moshe and Aharon.

It is also for this very reason that this counting was conducted in the month of *Iyar*—a month that focuses on personal growth. This aspect as well expressed, that the intent of the third accounting was to affect the Jewish people in a manner that permeated their very identity.

### The giving of the Torah

This same concept is also the connection between the *parsha* of Bamidbar and the giving of the Torah.

By the giving of the Torah, there were two things that were affected: the lowering of the supernal to the mundane, and the ability for the mundane to lift itself to the supernal.

As a preface to this unification of G-d and the Jewish people in these two manners, we read about the counting of the Jewish people, which was to affect the unification of G-dliness in the complete identity of the Jewish people.

This was as well a prelude to the giving of the Torah, where through Torah, G-d and the Jewish people were united as one.

*(Based on Likutei Sichos 8, Bamidbar 1, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel. To see other projects and to partner in our work, see: [www.Neirot.com](http://www.Neirot.com).)*