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# PARSHA ENCOUNTERS

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Parshas Bamidbar ✍️ Rabbi Meir Leib Mandelbaum

## Light Up the Night

**P**arshas Bamidbar opens with a census of the Bnei Yisroel. The Medrash (Bamidbar Rabba 2:13) discusses many pesukim which compare Bnei Yisroel to the stars and to the sand and specifically bless us that we should multiply to be as numerous as them.

The medrash explains the meaning of the comparison to the dust of the land. Just as dust is trodden upon by the entire world, so too Bnei Yisroel is stepped upon by the nations of the world. Similarly, the gemorah in Megillah 16a relates how Zeresh reprimanded her husband, Haman. The Jews are compared to the stars and the dust- when they rise, they rise as high as the stars, and when they fall, they fall as low as the dust.

In his dream, Hashem blessed Yaakov that his children should be as numerous as the sand. The question is, is this a blessing or a curse? Hashem definitely makes this analogy in the context of a bracha, yet we see from the above-mentioned words of Chazal that being compared to the sand is apparently not a blessing! The answer may be that the blessings of the stars and the dust have very different meanings. There are times when Klal Yisroel's world status is like the stars, we do well in our affairs and are blessed. This would be when the shechina is with us, such as when the Bais Hamikdash stood, and when it will again. The blessings of Hashem's hashgacha for times when things are bad, like the times of galus and hester panim, are promised in the comparison to the dust of the earth. Even through the darkness, Hashem will always be with us.

This idea may help explain a puzzling Targum Yonasan at the end of the tochacha in Bechukosai. On the passuk (26:42) "Vezacharti es brisis Yaakov v'af es brisi Yitzchok v'af es brisi Avraham ezkor", he states that 'brisi Yitzchok' is referring to the promise made to Avraham at the akeida in Parshas

Vayaira. This is likely in reference to the medrash brought by Rashi there on the passuk (22:17) "Ki Varech Avarechecha," (which connotes a double blessing)- "one for Avraham and one for Yitzchok". However, didn't Yitzchok himself receive a direct blessing in Parshas Toldos (26:3-4) that his children will inherit Eretz Yisroel and will multiply like the stars? Why would the Targum point to a blessing only inferred from one passuk when there is a straightforward possuk that says the very same thing? (Indeed, the Netziv in Haamek Davar brings the possuk in Toldos as the meaning of 'brisi Yitzchok'.)

But a closer look at the pesukim reveal that the language of the brachos to Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov differ slightly. In Yaakov's dream he was promised, "Your children will be **like the dust.**" Yitzchok (Toldos) was promised, "Your children will be like **the stars**". At the akeida, Avraham was promised "your children will be like the **stars and the sand**".

Perhaps the Targum Yonasan didn't mention the bracha promised to Yitzchok in Toldos because there he was only given the bracha of being like the stars. However, that is **not** the intention of the possuk in the tochacha. There, the Torah is telling us that even in the midst of the darkness and pain of the galus, Hashem's hashgacha will still be with us. For this Targum Yonasan brings the brocha at the akeida, because the medrash which Rashi brings there explains, [one for Avraham] is the blessing of the stars [and one for Yitzchok,] is the blessing of the sand. At the akeida, Yitzchok received a "galus bracha" in addition to his blessing of the stars in Toldos. It is precisely that bracha that would be needed in the midst of the tochacha! May we be zoche to realize the bracha of Kochvei Hashamayim-Like the stars of the heavens, speedily in our days.

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## Headcounts

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In this week's *parsha*, Hashem commands Moshe to count the *Bnei Yisrael*. *Rashi* explains that instead of conducting a headcount, each person gave in a coin. These coins were subsequently counted, similar to the counting done in *Parshas Ki Sisa*. The reason for this can be found in *Gemara Yuma 22b* where *Rebbi Yitzchok* states that it is forbidden to count *Bnei Yisrael* directly even for *mitzvah* purposes. He derives this *halacha* from the two episodes where *Shaul Hamelech* counted the nation indirectly despite the fact that the counting was for a *mitzvah*. The *Gemara* explains that it is for this reason that a *kohen* was chosen to remove the ashes from the *mizbeach* by counting fingers, because counting the *kohanim* themselves is forbidden. This *halacha* is codified by the *Rambam (Hil' Temidin 4:4)* and the *Magen Avrohom (O.C. 156:2)*. Let us discuss the practical applications of this *halacha*.

### Counting men for a *minyan*:

The *Pri Chadash (O.C. Siman 55)* says that one should refrain from counting the men in *shul* to see if a *minyan* is present. Common custom is to count those present using the verse (*Tehillim 28:9*) *Hoshea es amecha* etc. because this *possuk* contains ten words (*Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 15:3*). Others had the custom that every man present would recite one word from the verse (*Tehillim 5:8*) *Va'ani b'rov chasdicha* etc. (*Sefer Ha'orah*). Another option is to count the number of people mentally without saying the number out loud (*Kaf Hachaim 55:11*).

### Taking roll call:

Although roll call can be taken by reading off a list of names, this can be time-consuming when dealing with a large group, i.e. a camp. Is there an alternative way to count the people? The *Shevet Haleivi (1:34)* writes that it is forbidden to line up children and have them call out numbers one after another: one, two etc., because this is considered counting. Additionally, it is forbidden to count people by saying, "Not one, not two etc." (Harav D. Zucker Shlita and Harav S. Fuerst Shlita). However, according to many *poskim*, the prohibition is only to count heads and vital limbs, but counting people in an indirect manner, such as counting their fingers or other non-vital limbs, is permitted. This is based on the *gemara* in *Yuma (ibid.)* which permits counting the *kohanim* by their fingers (*Pe'as Hashulchan, Klei Chemda, Pardes Yosef Shemos 30:12*). Others, however, explain that counting fingers was only allowed since an exact count was not received (since some *kohanim* could abstain from the counting), but an exact count using fingers is prohibited (*Chasam Sofer, Igros Moshe Y.D. 3:117:2, Nachal Eisan 6:10:7*). Some say that counting people by their clothing, e.g. yarmulkes or shirts, may be permitted even according to the *Igros Moshe (Minchas Asher Bamidbar 1:6)*. Another option is to count the people mentally without saying the number out loud (Harav S. Fuerst Shlita).

### Census:

The issue of Jews taking part in a census is quite complex and we will try to discuss the main issues involved. It should be noted that in America this is a non-issue. A look at the form used in the U.S. Census of 2000 reveals that there were no questions about religion. Counting Jews along with the general population is permitted because no effort is made to ascertain the precise size of the Jewish community. Our discussion pertains to a census which is designed to determine the specific size of the Jewish community, such as the Israeli census.

1) The *Gemara* in *Berachos 62b* says that *Dovid Hamelech* stumbled by counting the Jewish nation without taking a ransom. Many commentators attempt to explain the nature of his sin. The *Ramban (Bamidbar 1:3)* says that *Dovid* surely counted the people using coins as mandated by the *Torah*. His error was that this is permitted only if a legitimate *tzorech* (need) exists. Since *Dovid's* count was undertaken solely to "gladden his heart" by showing that he ruled over a large populace, the nation was punished with a plague. Thus we see that a census is permitted only if a valid need exists. Some argue that the Israeli census is necessary because it helps economic planning and national security (*Torah Sheleima 21 pg. 168*), whereas others do not view this as a valid purpose (*Keraina De'igrisa 1:245*).

2) The *Ramban (ibid.)* offers an alternative explanation of *Dovid's* mistake and says that the *mitzvah* in the *Torah* to count *Bnei Yisrael* was only from the age of twenty, but counting the entire nation would be prohibited. *Dovid* erred by counting all those above the age of thirteen. Accordingly, one can argue that counting the entire population of *Eretz Yisrael* constitutes the counting of an entire community which would be forbidden (*Teshuvos Ve'hanhagos 3:387*, see *Nachal Eisan* *ibid.*).

3) The *Gemara* in *Yuma (ibid.)* states that counting may only be done in an indirect manner, such as counting pottery or lambs. When one writes his name on a census form is that considered indirect? Some say that this is considered indirect (*Pe'as Hashulchan*). The *Chasam Sofer* (quoted by *Shu"t Ksav Sofer Y.D. 106*), however, states that counting people through means of writing is considered a direct count and is therefore forbidden. He proves this from the fact that *Shaul* troubled himself to carry out the census using pottery and lambs instead of the simpler method of counting slips of paper. Based on this, one would be forbidden to write his name on the census form in order to be tallied. One solution may be to write down the names of the family members and have the tallying done by the census taker not in their presence (*Pe'as Hashulchan*). Another option may be to have forms that have been pre-numbered in the margin so that the head of the household merely needs to fill in the names, and the final tally will be done electronically by computer (*Tzitz Eliezer 7:3:41*).

4) We mentioned previously the *Chasam Sofer's* understanding of the *Gemara* in *Yuma* that counting the *kohanim* by their thumbs was permitted since some *kohanim* may abstain, thereby eliciting a non-accurate count. Based on this, one can permit the Israeli census for a different reason. Among the many Jews counted are some people who claim to be Jewish, but unfortunately are not *halachically* Jewish. Since the final count does not accurately represent the Jewish community, such a census would be permitted (*Shevet Haleivi 9:35, Keraina De'igrisa 1:244- see however #245* where he unequivocally forbids participation in the Israeli census).

### Family *simchos*, shul membership and school enrollment:

Common custom is to count the members of various organizations and also to figure out the number of guests planning to attend an event. The *halachic* basis for this is unclear, but apparently this is based on the opinion of the *Pe'as Hashulchan* who permits counting people in writing, and also counting people when they are not present (*Minchas Asher* *ibid.*). Additionally, a tally done by computer would certainly seem to be permitted.

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