

Parashat Bamidbar 5773, 2013:

Each Person is Truly a World

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Chazal (our Sages) named the fourth book of the Torah “*Sefer Hapekudim*” (the “Book of Counting”), which is translated in English as “Numbers.” It received this title since both the *sefer* and our *parasha* begin with a census of our people. Rashi (1040-1105) points out that this is actually the third time that our forebears were counted. The first tally took place when we departed Egypt, and the second, after we flagrantly erred with the incident of the *Egel Hazahav* (Golden Calf). These were very logical censuses. After all, it was crucial, for a variety of reasons, to know exactly how many men were available to be mustered for war. Thus, we were counted when we left Egypt. So, too, it was very reasonable for us to be counted following our great *chet* (sin), since it was once again critical to know how many had survived its aftermath. At first blush, however, the census at the beginning of our *parasha* appears to be without rhyme or reason. The truth, however, is far different. This act of counting served a higher and nobler purpose. It was neither an act of utilitarian counting, nor was it even very practical. Instead, this census was an act of true love; namely, the love that exists between Hashem and our people, which is so beautifully and powerfully portrayed in *Shir Hashirim* (the Song of Songs). Based upon this approach, Rashi answers the “why” question regarding this particular act of counting and teaches us: “Because of their beloved status before Him, He counted them at all times.” I would submit, moreover, that Hashem counted us because each one

of us is truly precious in His Divine eyes. Each individual among the Jewish people is a jewel in our King's crown. Like an earthly king, so to speak, He counts His priceless jewels.

So, too, *Chazal* focused upon the irreplaceable value of each and every individual among the Jewish people. The last mishnah in the fourth chapter of tractate *Sanhedrin* deals with the technical topic of how to guarantee the veracity of would-be witnesses. In this context, we are taught one of the most fundamental concepts of Judaism, namely, the sanctity of the individual:

Therefore, man was created alone to teach you that anyone who destroys even one soul (individual) from the Jewish people is considered by the Torah as if he has destroyed an entire world. [So, too,] anyone who saves even one soul (individual) from the Jewish people is considered by the Torah as if he has saved an entire world.

The world-renowned Talmud commentator, Rabbeinu Shmuel Eliezer Ben-Yehudah Halevi Edels (known as the Maharsha, 1555-1631), carefully analyzes the above passage and suggests the following deeply insightful interpretation: “The phrase in the Mishnah is very exact when it states: “*nefesh achat m'yisrael*” (one soul from the Jewish people) since the form of man who was created alone is the image of G-d, the One of the world...”

The Maharsha, by focusing upon the word “*nefesh*,” and its connection to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He), is urging us to recognize the stamp of Hashem that is uniquely engraved upon each and every member of the Jewish people. This concept overflows with profound ramifications. In a word, when we interact with another individual, we must remember that we are relating to someone within whom the presence

of Hashem is to be found. Therefore, regardless of the person's social and economic stature, or his level of education, he is *kadosh* (holy) since he is, in truth, G-d's representative in this world. This thought naturally leads to the following conclusion: We are required to treat each other with *kavod* (respect) since, by doing so, we are ultimately recognizing G-d's presence amongst us. In this way, we recognize that, as Hashem so clearly demonstrated at the beginning of our *parasha*, every Jew truly counts and deserves to be counted.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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