

Parashat Bamidbar 5774, 2014:

*To Be Precious in G-d's and Man's Eyes*

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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka.

*Chazal's* (our Sages') name for the fourth book of the Torah is *Sefer Hapekudim* (the "Book of Counting"), translated into English as "Numbers." This is because the *sefer*, and our *parasha*, begin with a census of our people. This census, however, appears a bit unusual. Rashi (1040-1105) points out that this is actually the third time that our ancestors were counted. The first took place when we left Egypt, and the second, after we flagrantly erred with the incident of the *Egel Hazahav* (Golden Calf). These were very logical acts of counting. After all, it was crucial to know exactly how many men were available for war after we departed Egypt. So, too, it was very reasonable for us to be counted, as Rashi opines, following our singular sin, the *Egel Hazahav*, since it was once again critical to know how many had survived its aftermath. The census in our *parasha*, however, seems unnecessary. 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 even very practical. It was, instead, an act of true love, of the type so beautifully and poignantly portrayed by *Shlomo Hamelech* (King Solomon) in *Shir Hashirim* (the Song of Songs):

The sound of my beloved! Behold, he is coming, skipping over the mountains, jumping over the hills. My beloved resembles a gazelle or a fawn of the hinds; behold, he is

standing behind our wall, looking from the windows, peering from the lattices. My beloved raised his voice and said to me, “Arise, my beloved, my fair one, and come away.” (2:8, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Based upon this approach, Rashi answers the “why” question regarding this census and teaches us: “Because of their beloved status before Him, He counted them at all times.” I would submit, moreover, that He counted us because each one of us is truly precious in His Divine eyes. Each individual among the Jewish people is, as it were, a jewel in our King’s crown. Like an earthly king, *lehavdil* (to draw a distinction), He counts His priceless jewels.

*Chazal*, as well, 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 irreplaceable sanctity of each individual:

Therefore, man was created alone to teach you that anyone who destroys even one soul (i.e. individual, *nefesh achat m'yisrael*) 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 analyzed this passage and suggested 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*, is urging us to recognize the imprint of Hashem that is uniquely etched upon each and every individual. This concept overflows with profound ramifications. In short, when we relate to our fellow Jew, we are duty-bound to remember that we are interacting with someone who bears the stamp of our Creator upon him. Therefore, regardless of a person’s social and economic stature, or 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: All Jews must be treated with *kavod* (respect), since by doing so, we are ultimately recognizing G-d’s presence amongst us. Therefore, we need to emulate Hashem and recognize, as He so clearly demonstrated at the beginning of our *parasha*, that every Jew truly counts and deserves to be counted. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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