

The CHASSIDUS PERSPECTIVE with Reb Yoel Kahn

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AFFECTIONATE COUNTING

Sefer Bamidbar is known as “Chumash Hapekudim”—the book of counting. The reason for this name is because this Chumash describes the counting of Bnei Yisroel, both in its beginning (Parshas Bamidbar) and in Parshas Pinchas.

The fact that the entire Sefer carries this name shows that counting is a lofty concept. However, counting seems to be a superficial activity. If one were to look into each person’s distinct traits, he would be unable to give each individual an equal number; one person has many talents, another lacks special qualities, while a third possesses negative traits! When one tallies a group, it demonstrates that he is not probing their inner essence, but is observing them externally, from a point of view where they all seem the same. If counting is so shallow, how is it that an entire Sefer is known as Chumash Hapekudim?!

The love of a parent for a child is associated with his very essence. If someone bothers your child, he is bothering *you*.

he is a Jew, in which each Jew is identical.

When describing the counting of Bnei Yisroel, Rashi (in the beginning of Bamidbar) uses the expression of *chibah*, affection: “Due to their affection before Him, He counts them continuously.”

There are two types of affection. The first is the appreciation one has for another’s positive character traits and beneficial qualities. This type of affection varies, depending on the extent of the other’s qualities. But then you have the love a parent has for a child. This affection does not depend on the child’s characteristics: whether he is clever or foolish, the parent loves him just the same, because he is *his* child. This type of affection is identical for every child.

There are actually two differences between these two types of affection:

One difference is with regard to the *person being cherished*: a quality-based affection varies from person to person, while a child-based affection applies equally to each child. Additionally, there is a second difference that relates to the *person showing affection*.

When one values another because of his positive qualities, the affection relates to the first person’s exterior aspects—his intellect, with which he perceives these qualities and appreciates them. But with a child, the love is associated with his very essence. If someone bothers your child, it is as if he is bothering *you*; the connection relates to the parent’s essence.

WHY DOES HASHEM LOVE US?

The affection of Hashem for Bnei Yisroel is in both ways.

Every Jew, from the highest to the lowest, possesses unique qualities that even the most pious gentile does not have. This leads to one type of affection on Hashem’s part. This affection varies from Jew to Jew, and it only relates to an external dimension Above.

However, Bnei Yisroel are also called Hashem’s children. Hashem’s love to us as a father to his child extends to each Jew equally, and “he who touches a Jew is as if he has touched Hashem’s eye”—the love relates to Hashem’s essence.

This is the meaning of Rashi’s words, “Due to their affection before

THE VALUE OF COUNTING

We find, however, that counting demonstrates an entity’s importance. There is a halachah that “*davar she'biminyan eino batel*—counted items are not *batel*.” Certain items are sold in estimated quantities, while other items are sold by their exact count. The fact that they are counted displays their value, and therefore they are not *batel* when mixed with other entities.

How does this fit with what was explained earlier, that counting indicates disregard for the entity’s value?

Both ideas are true. It depends if you’re looking at the *details* of the item or its *type*.

For example, let’s assume that apples are a *davar she'biminyan*—they are sold by number. Some apples are greater than others in quantity (size) or quality (sweetness); these characteristics reflect their *individual* significance, and are not subject to counting. But the fact that apples are sold by number shows that apples as a *group* are valuable.

TWO TYPES OF AFFECTION

The same is true with Bnei Yisroel. There are two dimensions to the value of a Jew. There are the specific qualities each Jew possesses, in which every person is different, and there is the value in the fact that

Him, He counts them continuously.” Rashi is referring to Hashem’s love of Bnei Yisroel as His children. Because of this essential affection, Hashem counts us, demonstrating (not our individual value, but) our significance as a people who are His children.

This also explains why Sefer Bamidbar is called Chumash Hapekudim. Counting is a special concept, as it displays the uniqueness of Bnei Yisroel, how we are Hashem’s children and are therefore all equal.

NOT THE FIRST

This leads us, however, to another question.

The censuses of Sefer Bamidbar were not the first times the Jews were counted. As Rashi says, Parshas Bamidbar was actually the third census: they were counted once when they left Mitzrayim, a second time after the *chet ha’egel*, and a third time now, when Hashem was ready to rest His Shechinah upon them (in the Mishkan). (In fact, there were earlier tallies that preceded even Yetzias Mitzrayim.)

That being the case, why is Sefer Bamidbar singled out to be called Chumash Hapekudim? In which way do the censuses it describes stand out from the previous ones?

FOCUSING ON THE DETAILS

When the Jews were counted before this Sefer, they were counted as a nation. The Torah states the sum total of how many Jews left Mitzrayim, and how many remained after the *chet ha’egel*.

The censuses of Sefer Bamidbar—both of Parshas Bamidbar and of Parshas Pinchas—were different. In addition to giving the total number of Bnei Yisroel, the Torah also states how many Jews there were in each *shevet*. With these censuses, the details, too, were reckoned with.

The previous tallies focused on the essence of a Jew—his *nekudas haYahadus*, thanks to which every Jew, from the highest to the lowest, has simple faith in Hashem and is prepared to sacrifice his

life for Him. However, they disregarded the specific qualities of each Jew, the unique type of *avodah* endowed to each person (and more generally, to each *shevet*).

With this census, by contrast, the individuality of each *shevet* was emphasized. Reuven denotes serving Hashem in a way of *re’iyah*—vision; and Shimon, with *shemiah*—hearing. Yissachar represents those who sit and study Torah; and Zevulun, those who are involved in business. Moreover, the Jews were counted “according to the number of their *names*,” and each name expresses the uniqueness of its bearer.

When the focus is on the common thread that unites all Jews, we can understand where counting plays a role. But in Sefer Bamidbar, the unique qualities of each *shevet* and individual are prominent. Where does the idea of counting come into the picture?

There is a higher aspect, in which one is involved in his distinct *avodah*, yet within that he feels the depth of his *nekudas haYahadus*.

ILLUMINATED WITH ESSENCE

This is the *chiddush* of the censuses of Sefer Bamidbar—that even the details of our *avodah* should be illuminated with our essential *nekudas haYahadus*.

There are times when a Jew rises above the parameters of his *metzius*; for example, when he sacrifices his life for Hashem. But then there is a higher aspect, in which one is involved in his distinct *avodah*, yet within that he feels the depth of his *nekudas haYahadus*.

This is why this type of counting took place “when Hashem was ready to rest his Shechinah upon them” (as Rashi says). The resting of the Shechinah reflects a similar idea, that the specific character of each Jew is imbued with the Shechinah, a level of Elokus that is beyond his existence.

For further study, see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 8, pp. 1ff.



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