

The 603,550th Jew

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

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In Hebrew, it's called *Bamidbar* ("In the Desert") and also *Sefer HaPekudim* ("The Book of the Countings"); in the English-speaking world, this is the biblical section known as "Numbers." And yes, there are many, many numbers in the fourth of the Torah's five books.

In its opening chapters we learn that one year after the Exodus, there were 603,550 adult Israelite males between the ages of 20 and 60, of whom 22,273 were firstborn; a separate census counted 22,300 Levites age one month and older (7,500 Gershonites, 8,600 Kehattites, and 6,200 in the Merrari clan). We are also given the figure for each of the twelve tribes, from Judah's 74,600 to Menasseh's 32,200. Then the Torah tallies the number in each of the four "camps" into which the twelve tribes were divided: Judah's camp, which also included the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun, totaled 186,400; the three tribes in Reuben's camp totaled 151,450; Ephraim's camp included 108,100, and 157,600 pitched their tents in the Camp of Dan.

Twenty six chapters and 39 years later we're still in the Book of Numbers and in the midst of another census. Again, we get the total figure (now 601,730) and the numbers for each tribe. We notice that Simeon has been tragically decimated (22,200, down from 59,300) while Menasseh's ranks have swelled to 52,700 (a gain of 20,500). But most of all we notice how G-d's passion for counting His people has not waned.

For, as G-d says to Moses, we're not just counting people. We're "raising their heads."

When a census is taken, the count will include scholars and boors, professionals and vagabonds, philanthropists and misers, saints and criminals. Yet each counts for no more and no less than "1" in the total number. The count reflects only the one quality they all share equally: the fact that each is an individual human being.

So is a headcount an expression of the lowest common denominator in a collection of individuals? The answer depends on how one views the essence of humanity. If man is basically neutral or worse -- if we all begin with zero and make of ourselves what we are -- than what unites us as individuals is indeed the least of our qualities. G-d, however, has a different perspective on the "huddled masses" of man.

As G-d sees it, the soul of man is a spark of His own fire -- a spark with the potential to reflect the infinite goodness and perfection of its source. Human life is the endeavor to realize what is implicit in this spark. Indeed, a person may lead a full, accomplished and righteous life and barely scratch the surface of the infinitude of his or her soul. Another person may blunder for a lifetime in darkness and iniquity and then, in a moment of self-discovery, fan their Divine spark into roaring flame.

So when G-d instructs that we be counted, it is an expression of our *highest* common denominator. On the Divine census sheet, our differences are transcended to reveal the simple fact of our being -- a fact which expresses what is best in us, and from which stems all that is good in us.

G-d counts us not to know our number (which He obviously knows), or even to get in touch with the quintessence of our souls (which He obviously is). He counts us to accentuate our soul of souls, to give expression to its essence and to make it more accessible to our material-bound lives.

Therein lies the deeper significance of the idiom "raise the heads" in G-d's instruction to Moses to count the people of Israel. When G-d counts us, He is stimulating the highest and loftiest part of our being, the spark of Divinity which lies at the core of our soul.

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14 May | 2 Sivan

Parashat Bamidbar

Shabbat Begins: 8:30 pm

Shabbat Ends: 9:44 pm