



## Why do we Refrain from Counting Fellow Jews?

### Can you Count on Being in Control?

If you ask a pious, kerchiefed mother of a blessed flock of kids, how many children she has, she most likely won't give you a straight answer. She also won't tell you or anyone else, save for her immediate family when she is expecting her next child. If you ask me, how many students are in the Midrasha, I will find ways to avert your question. I may start mentioning some of the students by name and where they are from, but I won't give out a specific number, just as I won't disclose how much money we have in the bank. Everyone knows that's private information. Yet, it's funny how in the Western World, we hang onto externalities and numbers. What difference does it make if there are 5 or 15 students, when every single Jew is considered an entire world? "Whoever destroys a soul [of Israel], it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. Whoever saves a life of Israel, it is considered as if he saved an entire world" (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4:5; *Yerushalmi Talmud* 4:9; *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* 37a). Although we realize that it's not quantity but quality that counts, we still judge and compare people and places based on numbers, because numbers give us a certain feeling of grasp and control. In order to control their eating, people are preoccupied with counting calories. For a business to have control of its inventory, it needs to count, verify and audit all the items in its account. Yet how can you control holy Jewish souls as if they were part of your inventory?

### Blessings Beyond Boundaries

The Hebrew word צְנִיּוּת/*tzniut* is loosely but not comprehensively translated as 'modesty.' Perhaps, it is more accurately translated as 'hidden.' A person of *tzniut* doesn't flaunt his or her assets. This applies to our body, children, talents, accomplishments and possessions alike. We try to keep quiet when we are dating, pregnant, promoted, trying for a high position, etc. as we recognize that "a blessing comes in a hidden place." By keeping quiet and hidden, assuming a low profile, we are protected against *ayin hara* (the evil eye), (*Maharsha, Baba Metzia* 42a).

#### תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף מ"ב/א

ואמר רבי יצחק אין הברכה מצויה אלא בדבר הסמוי מן העין שנאמר יצו ה' אתך את הברכה באסמך תנא דבי רבי ישמעאל אין הברכה מצויה אלא בדבר שאין העין שולטת בו שנאמר יצו ה' אתך את הברכה באסמך.

Rabbi Yitzchak said, "The Blessing is only found in something hidden from the eye..." as it states, "Hashem shall command the blessing upon you בְּאֲסָמְךָ/*ba'asamecha* – 'in your barns' and in all that you set your hand to. He shall bless you in the land which Hashem your G-d gives you" (*Devarim* 28:8). Rabbi Yisrael taught, "The blessing is only found in something over which the eye does not have power, as it states, 'Hashem will command the blessing upon you בְּאֲסָמְךָ/*ba'asamecha* – 'in your hidden matters'..." (*Devarim* 28:8); (*Babylonian Talmud, Babba Metzia* 42a).

Since the word אֲסָמְךָ/*asamecha* – 'storehouses,' and סָמוּי/*samui* – 'hidden' share the same root, our Sages extrapolate that blessing applies to the matters of which the quantity is yet unknown. Maharal explains that the eye sets a boundary for everything, yet the matter of the blessing is that it is beyond boundary.

## Unconventional Counting

It is forbidden to count the people of Israel even for [the purpose of fulfilling] a commandment... Whosoever counts Israel, transgresses a [biblical] prohibition, as it is said: "Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which shall neither be measured nor counted" (*Hoshea* 2:1); (*Babylonian Talmud, Yoma* 22b). We can now understand why the counting of Israel that opens *Parashat Ki Tisa* was not done in the conventional way. Hashem commanded each Jew to donate half an ancient *shekel* coin for the communal collection. By counting all the coins, Moshe would know the number of Israelites.

ספר שמות פרק ל פסוק יב כי תשא את ראש בני ישראל לפקדיהם ונתנו איש כפר נפשו להשם בפקד אתם ולא יהיה בהם נגף בפקד אתם: (יג) זה יתנו כל העבר על הפקדים מחצית השקל בשקל הקדש...  
 "When you take the census of the children of Israel according to their numbers, let each man give to Hashem an atonement for his soul when you count them, then there will be no plague among them when they are counted. This they shall give, everyone who passes through the counting, half a *shekel* [coin] of the holy Shekel..." (*Shemot* 30:12-13).

The Ba'al HaTurim notes that the word *שֶׁקֶל*/shekel has the same numerical value as *נֶפֶשׁ*/*nefesh* – 'soul' (430). This alludes to the fact that giving donations atones for a person's soul and saves the donor from any evil decree. Unfortunately, after King David had counted his people in the conventional way, a great plague struck, and many Jews died (II *Shemuel*, chapter 24). Rashi explains that when counting through donating, the *ayin hara* does not have any power over the Israelites. If so, the plague that resulted from King David's counting could have been prevented (Rashi, *Shemot* 30:12). The problem with counting the regular way is that it may seem as a show of power, as if the one counting proclaims, "Look how many and mighty we are!" In order to avoid becoming arrogant and triggering jealousy, the Torah teaches us to count in the most discreet and unpretentious way possible. Therefore, to this day it is the custom to avoid counting people in the regular fashion. When a Torah teacher needs to count the children on an excursion to ensure none are lost or when it is necessary to count a group of men to know whether there is a minyan or not, the custom is to use the following Torah verse which has ten words of blessing (in Hebrew):

ספר תהילים פרק כח פסוק ט הושיעה את עמך וברך את נחלתך ורעים ונשאים עד העולם:  
 "Save Your people, and bless Your inheritance; and tend them, and carry them forever" (*Tehillim* 28:9).

This traditional way of counting is done by a person reciting the verse word by word while pointing at the person in the quorum. When he reaches the last word, everyone knows that there are ten people in the room, and prayers can begin.

## Preemptive Protection from Haman's Plot

G-d knew that Haman would pay shekel coins for [permission to destroy] the Jews. Therefore, He anticipated the shekel coins of the Jewish people to those of Haman, as we learned, "The collection of *shekalim* is announced on the first day of Adar" [thus preceding Haman's plot to annihilate the Jews on the thirteenth of Adar] (*Babylonian Talmud, Megillah* 13b).

What is the connection between our donations and Haman's bribe? The half-shekel coins collected in Moshe's time were used to make the *adanim*, the silver sockets that formed the Tabernacle's foundation. This act established the connection between the divine service of the individual and the spiritual accomplishments of the nation. Even without a spiritual center in

Jerusalem, the unity of Israel protects the Jewish people, as each individual contributes to elevate the nation as a whole. Although the gentiles were aware of the people of Israel's special Divine protection, Haman felt that this protection only applied when the Jewish people lived together as one people in their own land. But once they were exiled from their land, they were no longer a nation, just a group of individuals – “dispersed and separated among the nations” (*Esther* 3:8). Stripped of their Divine protection, Haman assumed that it was now possible to annihilate them. Therefore, he weighed out his silver shekels to purchase the right “to destroy them” (*Esther* 3:9). Not ‘to destroy *it*’ – the nation – but *them* – these dispersed individuals. Hashem, however, thwarted his plot, as the Jewish people are united even when we are in exile. By preceding Haman's shekels with our shekel donation, we demonstrate the perpetual unity and collective holiness of Israel.

### The Coin of Fiery Unity

Why were the Israelites commanded to give half a shekel rather than a whole shekel? This is to teach that we can never reach perfection on our own, but only by joining ourselves to another Jew. Therefore, it was specifically required to give half a shekel to emphasize that we need each other to reach perfection. Moreover, we never know the identity of the person whose half shekel completes our own. Even the simplest person has the ability to perfect the greatest among Israel.

**ספר שמות פרק ל פסוק טו הַעֲשִׂיר לֹא יִרְבֶּה וְהִדֵּל לֹא יִמְעִיט מִמִּחְצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל לָתֵת אֶת תְּרוּמַת הַשֵּׁם לְכָפֹר עַל נַפְשֵׁיכֶם:**

“The rich shall give no more, and the poor shall give no less than half a shekel, with which to give the offering to Hashem, to atone for your souls (*Shemot* 30:15).

Through the donations for the Tabernacle's foundation and the subsequent years for the communal sacrifice the Torah wanted to emphasize the equality of all Israel. The identical donations of the half shekel engender unity. It erases the barriers of economic status, social and intellectual differences. Before the Creator, we are all equal. Our collective atonement depends upon the half shekel collected from each individual. If one person did not donate, no one else could make up for it. The Midrash states that Moshe had difficulty understanding which coin to collect, so Hashem showed him a half-shekel coin made from fire from beneath His Throne of Glory (*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 12:3). G-d showed Moshe the second half of the shekel – not as a metal coin, which would signify merely their practical cooperation, but as a coin of fire, representing their unity in thought – a burning love emanating from the very root of their souls.