

26 Iyar 5765
June 4, '05

Bamidbar

Hand in Your Papers

It is final exam season once again, and my heart goes out to all of the students who will have to suffer that dreaded moment – the moment when you “give in your test.” It is not even so much whether the answers are right or wrong, but the mere fact that one’s aptitude and achievement – one’s entire “self” – is transferred to ink and paper, to be scrutinized and graded, that is so unsettling. It is an intense moment.

And this concept is not without parallel (albeit on a much deeper and more significant level) in our parsha.

Parshas Bamidbar, as we know, begins with the census of the Jewish People. The Ramban comments, famously, that one of the benefits of the count was the process itself. The mere fact that every member of the Jewish People had to appear before Moshe and Aharon and merited a moment of their undivided attention was a most invaluable experience. Henceforth, when these great leaders would pray on behalf of their people, there was a personal memory of and connection to each and every one of them. This momentary relationship itself was a goal of the counting. (See Ramban 1:3, who explains that the connotation of the word *tifkedu* is to give special attention. In his commentary to 1:45, he explains the benefit of the personal encounter with Moshe and Aharon.)

But were this to be the extent of the experiential benefit of the census, then it was of very limited duration – a fleeting moment with the *Gedolai HaDor* (great men of the generation). I believe, however, that according to some Commentators, it was a more lasting experience.

How was the census achieved? Rashi asserts that it was by means of a half-shekel collection from each Jew, just as the count in Parshas Ki Sisa was carried out.

However, many Commentators disagree with this contention (see Kli Yakar 1:2, s.v. *kol zachar*) and maintain that the Torah’s omission of any mention of a half-shekel collection indicates the absence of any such procedure. The Netziv (*Haamek Davar* 1:2, s.v. *b’mispar shemos*) asserts that the count was taken exactly as the verse implies – by “counting names.” Each Jew submitted a card with his name and tribe on it. All of the names were then counted. Later in his commentary (1:42), the Netziv records that his father-in-law (the esteemed Rabbi Yitzchok of Volozhin) had a tradition in the name of the holy *Arizal* that this was, in fact, how the count was taken.

The Arizal had explained that a subtle textual difficulty can be resolved with this understanding. If we read the text carefully, we will find that with regard to the census of each of the tribes, the Torah begins by saying *livnei Shimon* (for the family of Shimon), *livnei Gad* (for the family of Gad), etc. But when we come to Naftali, it does not say “livnei” (for the family of) but rather “bnei” (the family of). The Arizal explained this anomaly: all of the people gave in slips with their names on them. The names were all put in a very large box. Then, the tribal leaders came forward and each took out the cards containing names of members of his tribe, and placed them in his own box. Having collected all of his tribe’s members’ names, the leader would count and announce the sum of all of the tags in his box. However, since the tribe of Naftali was

counted last, it was not necessary to collect their names and move them to a separate box. Rather, the leader simply counted the names remaining in the large box, after all of the other tribes had taken their names out. Thus, for every other tribe it was a count of the names that came out “for” the tribe. Naftali, however, was merely a count of the number of members, without having been drawn especially “for” the tribe.

If the counting process was, in fact, as the Netziv describes, then the Ramban’s concept of personal attention is taken a level further.

In the world of Chasidism, the Chasid in need has always traditionally come to the Rebbe with a *kvittel* – a piece of paper with one’s name on it for the Rebbe to refer to when praying on the Chasid’s behalf. This practice was taken so seriously, that at times Jews seemed to have gone “a little overboard” with it. (See Responsa Maharsham 3:225, who records an incident in which a certain rabbi allowed a Jew to ask a Gentile to write and send a kvittel to the Belzer Rebbe who was visiting the city of Brod on Shabbos, so the Rebbe could pray for an ill person. When the great Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, Chief Rabbi of Brod, heard of this ruling he was irate and he had the rabbi removed from his rabbinic position. The Belzer Rebbe himself was also very upset at this ruling. But this incident gives a picture of how seriously *kvitluch* were taken by Jews.)

Some say that the source of having a great Jew pray on one’s behalf is from the above-cited Ramban’s commentary on this week’s parsha. Perhaps, then, the source of the practice of giving a kvittel can also be found in our parsha, if we follow the Netziv’s understanding. It is very special to have an encounter with a *Gadol* (great person). It is even more special if we leave him with something permanent that is representative of ourselves.

How much more so with the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. Perhaps this is the feeling that drives some people, when standing at the *Kosel* to put in a piece of paper with their name and request on it. We all long for an encounter with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, and we cherish the moments of closeness and try to keep them alive forever.