

The Measure of Jewish Strength

Category: Balak, Bamidbar

What defines Jewish justice?

Counting Jews

Good Shabbos!

A few weeks ago, the Pew Research Center released a demographic study of American Jews. Every time the subject of Jewish demographics comes up, it immediately reminds me of the prohibition of counting Jews that is mentioned at the beginning of the Torah portion of Ki Tisa. There, the Torah states, “When you count the heads of the Sons of Israel according to their numbers, let each one give to the L-rd an atonement for his soul when they are counted; then there will be no plague among them when they are counted” (Shemos 30:11).

The Torah warns us not to count Jewish people, so that there will be no plague among them. Rashi explains why counting Jews can cause a plague—“because the Evil Eye is influenced by numbers.”

This means that anything with a precise figure is influenced by the Evil Eye, and blessing only rests on something obscured from the eye. (What the Evil Eye means is something else—it doesn’t refer to some autonomous evil force outside of G-d but rather, the negative power of people taking note of a specific good thing and harboring jealous or otherwise negative thoughts or feelings toward that specific good thing.)

From that came the custom in which we use a verse consisting of ten words when we want to count ten Jews for a minyan. Another version of that method is to use the phrase “not one... not two... not three,” and so on. The idea there is to emphasize that you’re not counting Jews.

The concern for the Evil Eye appears in our Torah portion of Balak too. In this Parshah, we read at length about the prophecy of Bil’am—and in his third prophecy, before Bil’am speaks the famous verse, “How goodly are your tents, Jacob; your dwelling places, Israel!”, the Torah tells us: “And Bil’am lifted his

eyes.” Rashi explains that to mean that “he sought to introduce an Evil Eye into them” (Bamidbar 24:2).

Why We Don't Count

On a deeper level, what is so bad about counting the Jewish people? Why is it something we don't do?

In every developed country you have regular economic data and census reports. You will have a special government office that keeps tabs on the demographics of the population, and it costs a lot. Every year, or in some cases, every quarter, the results are publicized.

One of the simple reasons governments are busy with counting their populations is because it demonstrates the strength of the country—the more people the country has, the more strength the country seems to have.

But the Jewish Nation's strength is not measured by its number of people. The fact is our numbers are very low—the words of Moshe Rabbeinu still hold true: “You are the least of all the nations” (Devarim 7:7).

Now, how is the strength of the Jewish Nation measured? How are we supposed to count Jews?

For that, the Torah itself teaches us how to do so in the Parshah of Ki Tisa: “Let each one give to the L-rd an atonement for his soul when they are counted.” Every Jew had to donate a half shekel coin, and then they counted the donated coins to know how many Jews there were.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks commented that the Jewish Nation is measured not by the number of its people but by the contributions it makes to humanity—what they gave to the world. And this is the essential strength of the Jewish Nation.

The Jewish Contribution

What exactly do we give to the world?

The answer lies in the difference between Bil'am and Avraham Avinu.

You know, there is one person throughout the entire Tanach whom the Torah crowns with the description of tzadik. Today, everyone considers himself a tzadik—but the Torah is very “stingy” with this honorific. The only one in the entire Tanach called a tzadik is Noach. However, Noach was not chosen to be the first Jew.

Why not?

The Rebbe explained that “Noach didn’t ask for mercy for his generation.” Instead, he accepted the situation as it was. Noach was a conformist, a person who accepted things the way they were and didn’t try to change them. And therefore, even though he was a “tzadik,” it was not with him that the Jewish Nation would begin.

Avraham Avinu, on the other hand, was in no way ready to accept the world the way it was—on the contrary, he constantly fought to change it.

Avraham was born into a world of idol worshippers, but he came to the personal conclusion at a young age that there had to be a First Cause, an ultimate Creator of the Universe. However, Avraham didn’t keep that secret to himself: He decided to go and spread faith in the Creator. He wanted to change the world. He was not prepared to accept the status quo but rather, he wanted to change it.

That is a Jewish characteristic. Jews do not accept the world as it is as a Heavenly decree. Instead, they are prepared to confront even heaven so as to change the situation.

The most famous example of this is Moshe Rabbeinu himself at the Sin of the Golden Calf, when G-d told him, “And now, leave Me be...” so He could proceed to obliterate the Jewish Nation (Shmos 32:10). But Moshe gave G-d an ultimatum, as it were, saying, “And now, if You will bear their sin; and if not, please erase me from Your book” (32:32).

We find this same attribute with Avraham, too. When G-d told him that He was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Avraham protested and said, “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?!” (Bereishis 18:25). He asked G-d, “Where’s the justice in that?”

When Righteousness Precedes Justice

And here we find the difference between Bil'am and the Jewish nation:

When Bil'am "turned his face to the desert" (Bamidbar 24:1), Rashi says simply: "As the Targum has it."

What does the Targum explain? The Targum says, "to recall to memory the work of the calf which they had committed there."

Bil'am also tried to effect "justice" for the Jewish Nation. He complained to G-d, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?!" How is it that You compromised on the Sin of the Golden Calf? Bilam argued that "justice" must be served— and that the Jewish Nation must be punished.

Here's the huge difference: Avraham argued the case of justice and integrity so as to save people from Heavenly decrees. Bilam argued the case of justice and integrity so as to hurt people.

When Torah mentions "justice," it precedes it with the word "tzedakah," which means "charity," but also means "righteousness," which translates to justice.

Torah tells us about Avraham Avinu one verse before the story of Sodom: "For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him... to perform righteousness and justice" (Bereishis 18:19).

The Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 5:2) tells us that the Torah precedes tzedakah to mishpat (justice) to tell us that with Avraham Avinu, tzedakah—meaning, what is right—comes before justice.

Jews are constantly demanding justice—but they demand justice whose essence is tzedakah.

There are many activists who demand "justice." But if their "justice" causes harm to people, they are "of the students of Bil'am." But if their justice helps people, then they are "of the students of Avraham Avinu."