



Jews Aren't Counted

Category: Ki Sisa

Why is there a custom not to count Jews, and what does it say about how we value ourselves?

Assimilation

One of the burning problems in the Jewish world has always been assimilation. However, a British study that came out some years ago reported an encouraging development.

In England, the study found, the assimilation rate in 2014 stood at 26 percent—one out of every four Jews, but still a recognizable improvement compared to the rate of the 1980s.

Another interesting discovery for British Jewry is that people under 40 are now more likely to describe themselves as religious than those older. The researchers said that their study is the largest and most far-reaching ever done on British Jewry, adding that in recent decades, the British Jewish community has now declared its view on the issue of the Jewish identity of its younger members—and that the study has clarified that the community is on the right track.

Now, when we compare that study to a similar study done on American Jewry, the results are even more surprising. While the assimilation situation in Great Britain has improved, the opposite is unfortunately true for the United States, where assimilation is worsening.

What is British Jewry's secret? What are they doing right that their American brethren are not?

The Answer

The answer is clear: They drink tea every afternoon, and they drive on the wrong side of the road.

But seriously, my friends, what the experts across the pond over there say is that the primary reason for such heartening results is that a high percentage of Jewish students in Great Britain receive a Jewish day school education, in contrast to Jewish students in the U.S. who do not.

However, this fact was not always like that; the revolution only occurred in recent years.

Former Chief Rabbi of Britain, Lord Jonathan Sacks, recently noted that at the time he was appointed Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, only 18 percent of children in the British Jewish community were going to Jewish Day Schools. At the time, he wrote a book entitled, "Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren? Jewish Continuity and How to Achieve It" (Valentine Mitchell, 1994). According to Rabbi Sacks, the question triggered a wave among British Jewry, resulting in awareness of Jewish education and the opening of more Jewish schools.

And some two decades later, when Rabbi Sacks retired from the rabbinate, the percentage of Jewish kids in Jewish day schools stood at close to 70 percent!

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

We Don't Count

In this week's Parsha, we start with something unusual: G-d instructs Moshe (Shmos 30:12), "When you take the sum of the children of Israel according to their numbers..." But instead of counting people directly, G-d commands that each person give a half-shekel, and by counting the coins, Moshe will determine their number. As Rashi explains, this method prevents a plague from striking those who are counted.

From this, Rashi highlights the danger of physically counting Jews, which is why Halachah (Jewish law) prohibits direct counting. Throughout history, Jews have found creative ways to count themselves without violating this rule.

For instance, when Shaul HaMelech needed to count his troops, he avoided numbering them directly. Instead, as Rashi explains (Shmuel I:15:4), he had each soldier take a sheep from the royal flock and then counted the sheep.

Similarly, during the Second Temple Era, King Agrifas wanted to determine how many men came to offer the Passover sacrifice in Jerusalem. The Talmud recounts that rather than counting individuals, they counted the kidneys from the sacrifices, allowing them to estimate the number of participants without directly numbering the people.

Here's another example: In the Beis Hamikdash, to determine which Kohein would begin the day's service, they used a system of drawing lots. Maimonides explains that a random number was secretly chosen, and the Kohanim would then extend one or two fingers while standing in a circle. The head Kohein would count the fingers—not the people—until reaching the selected number, and that Kohein would be given the task (Laws of Constant and Additional Sacrifices 4:3). The reason for counting fingers instead of individuals? Because Halachah forbids directly counting Jews, as seen in the verse, "And he counted them by sheep."

However, there is one instance in Tanach where Jews were counted directly. In Divrei HaYamim (Chronicles), it describes how Satan incited King David to take a census of Israel. Despite his general Yoav's objections—warning that it could bring guilt upon the people—David insisted. The result was devastating: a plague struck the Jewish Nation, leading to the loss of 70,000 lives (Divrei HaYamim I:21:1-17).

The Verses Instead

Even today we are very warned against counting Jews. When we want to know how many men are present in the synagogue and if there is a minyan, there are several ways of counting. One common way is by saying, "*Not one, not two, not three...*", thus emphasizing that you're not counting them. (Well, at least technically.)

Another custom for how to count Jews without counting them is mentioned in Halachah: By using a verse that contains precisely ten words. When you count people using one word per person, if

there are ten people, you know you have a minyan if you complete the verse.

One such verse is “Va’ani b’rov chasdecha...” It’s from Tehilim 5:8. Translated into English, it’s a lot more than ten words: “But I, with Your great loving-kindness, shall enter Your House; I shall prostrate myself toward Your Holy Temple in the fear of You.” (So if you ever want to see if you have 23 Jews, use that verse in English.) But in the original Hebrew, it’s ten words.

However, in more recent generations, the custom has been to use a different verse. You’ll find this one in the “Hodu” prayer right at the start of the morning services.

This verse, “Hoshiya,” also comes from Psalms, 28:9. It means, “Save Your people and bless Your inheritance, and tend them and elevate them forever.” In its original Hebrew, it’s exactly ten words. You may have heard the song “Hoshiya” here—that’s the one.

The Rebbe asks: why indeed did the custom change? What was so bad about the first verse, which speaks of the Jew coming to synagogue—“but I... shall enter Your house”?

The Rebbe explains that, in recent generations, as we get closer and closer to the coming of Moshiach, then at every opportunity when Jews gather, we immediately turn to G-d and ask Him: “Save Your nation!” Send us Moshiach! (Hisvaduyos 5743 Vol. II, pg. 1137).

But Why?

With all that, we can still ask: Why is it actually forbidden to

count Jews? What's so bad about it?

Rashi in our Parshah explains that counting invites the “Evil Eye” (Shmos 30:12). In simple terms, when something is explicitly counted, it can trigger jealousy—others may wonder why someone else has more than they do. This, in turn, can lead to scrutiny from Heaven, where one's merits may be re-evaluated.

Because of this, Jewish tradition has always been careful to avoid counting—not just people, but anything that could attract unwanted attention. As the Talmud teaches, blessing is found in things that are hidden from the eye, not in what is measured, weighed, or counted (Bava Metzia 42a).

But Rabbi Sacks, in his previously mentioned book, offers another explanation on the prohibition to count Jews.

Jewish Numbers vs. Jewish Influence

For starters, the Jewish Nation has a tremendous influence on the world, completely out of proportion to their numerical quantity. As a matter of fact, there was a research experiment carried out a few years ago in which they had researchers stand out on the street and ask random passersby what percentage of the U.S. population was Jewish.

Almost everyone said that Jews are about 20 percent of the population.

The truth, of course, is that Jews constitute about two percent of the U.S. population—but we have to acknowledge the fact that our influence encompasses far more than our demographic

numbers.

And so, Rabbi Sacks reasons, if we are to count the Jewish Nation and discover that “You are the least of all nations” (Devarim 6:7), it’s likely that the Jew will become dispirited and think, “How can we stand strong? There are seven billion people in the world, and we at best are a fraction from a numerical standpoint! There’s no chance we can hold out as a Jewish nation!”

And so, according to Rabbi Sacks, knowing the true number of how many Jews there actually are will only cause depression and loss of morale; it will promote despair, not action. And so it is forbidden to count Jews, because nothing good will come of it.

All the research and studies that they do to know how many Jews there are and how many of them marry other Jews only ultimately introduce despair and faint-heartedness in the Jewish community.

So what we need to do instead is count how many Jews are Nobel Prize winners, how many doctors are Jews and how much charity is donated by Jews—because the Jewish Nation is not measured by the quantity of its members but rather, by the measure of its influence on the world.

We each need to ask ourselves: What have I done today to influence someone else to come closer to G-d? Because as far as the Jew is concerned, “If you aren’t influencing someone, you don’t exist”—because at the end of the day, our entire mission is to bring the world to awareness of G-d.

Good Shabbos!