

The parsha begins with counting Klal Yisroel. Rashi explains that because of their preciousness, Hashem counts them at regular intervals. Once when they left Egypt and again after they sinned with the eigel, and again when the Shechinah is about to dwell among them, after they completed the construction of the Mishkan.

In Parshas Shemos, Rashi says the following:

אע"פ שמנאן בחייהן בשמותם, חזר ומנאן במיתתן, להודיע חבתן שנמשלו לזכובים, שמוציאן ומכניסן במספר ובשמותם, שנאמר המוציא במספר צבאם לכולם בשם יקרא (ישעי' מ, כו. שמו"ר א,ג):

Hashem counted Bnei Yisroel to show how precious they are to Him. Like He counts the stars. They are given a number, but each one still has a name of its own.

There is a halacha which says that we do not count Jews directly by number. But why not?

Whenever you count a number of items – like apples – and give a total sum, you are ignoring the uniqueness of each apple you are counting. The number ignores how big or small it is or what color it is, etc. Instead, you are just assigning them a number – and this erases all its individual, unique qualities. So too, when you count numbers of people, you erase their individuality. Only Hashem can count in numbers while still retaining the unique identity of each individual. Since we aren't able to do that, we cannot directly count Jews in numbers. Each Jew has tremendous value. His neshomo is of infinite value.

I heard a story from my Rebbe about Rav Chaim, who had to leave Brisk and relocate in Minsk during the First World War. Many Jewish communities were uprooted and dislocated as a result of the war and Rav Chaim was visibly shaken by the constant stream of tragic news he was hearing while in Minsk. Someone wanted to console Rav Chaim by suggesting that perhaps all this suffering will be worth it if it means Moshiach will come sooner. Rav Chaim rejected this as a consolation because it means you don't appreciate the value of each Jew. When a Jewish neshomo is lost, it is infinitely tragic. We are mechallel Shabbos to save every neshomo. You can't justify losing a single precious neshomo in order to bring geuloh. That is not a cheshbon we are allowed to make.

We live in a very strange society where everything is valued in terms of numbers. But in Yiddishkeit, only three things justify the pushing away the value of a neshomo – the three aveiros chamuros. The only reason a person is allowed to give up his life is for ahavas Hashem – to show that Hashem is the highest value in his life. He makes a statement that his love for Hashem and his connection to Hashem is more important than his life. My life is only valuable if I have a connection to Hashem.

The value of a single Jewish life is not outweighed by the benefit that could be given to a greater number of other people. This is the reason socialism is against the yesodos of Yiddishkeit. In socialism, a person is only valuable inasmuch as he contributes to society. The whole way of talking about "what are you giving to society" shows a belief that the good of society is the highest value – worth more than the life of any individual. This view of human life goes back to the late 1800's.

We believe we are valuable as individuals because we each have a tzelem Elokim. See Rashi in Bereishis to the posuk describing the creation of Odom:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא

אֹתָם:

The common translation capitalizes 'b'tzalmo' as "His image" – referring to Hashem. But this would create a repetition in the posuk because the next words also say it is the tzelem Elokim.

Rashi says 'b'tzalmo' refers to the individual form that Hashem designed especially for each person.

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ. בְּדִפּוּס הַעֲשׂוֹי לוֹ.

This is conveying a powerful message. Hashem made each one of us with an individual, unique neshomo. An entire world in himself. We can't reduce a Jew to just a number. The Mishna in Ovos says human beings are precious because we were all created b'tzelem – as an individual.

This is one aspect of counting. Rashi in Shemos explains Hashem can count us as numbers and individuals. The posuk in Bamidbar goes on to list the heads of each Shevet.

(ה) וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר יַעֲמִדוּ אִתְּכֶם לְרֹאשׁוֹן בֶּן נַטִּיָּאֹר:
(ו) לְשֹׁמְעוֹן שְׁלֹמִיאל בֶּן צוּרִישַׁדִּי: (ז) לִיהוּדָה נַחֲשׁוֹן בֶּן עֲמִינָדָב: (ח) לִישָׁשָׁכָר
נַתָּנאל בֶּן צוּפֹר: (ט) לְזָבוּלֹן אֱלִיאָב בֶּן חֶלֶץ: (י) לְבִנְיָמִן יוֹסֵף לְאֶפְרַיִם אֱלִישַׁמָּע
בֶּן עֲמִיהוּד לְמִנְשֵׁה גַמְלִיאֵל בֶּן פִּדְחָצוּר: (יא) לְדָנִיֵּאל אֲבִיָּדָן בֶּן גִּדְעֹנִי: (יב) לְרָדָן
אֲחִיעֶזֶר בֶּן עֲמִישַׁדִּי: (יג) לְאֶשֶׁר פִּגְעִיאֵל בֶּן עֶכְרָן: (יד) לְגָד אֶלְיָסָף בֶּן דְּעִיאֵל:
(טו) לְנַפְתָּלִי אֲחִירַע בֶּן עֵינָן:

Reuvain's nosi was called Eli'tzur ben Shedei'ur. His name means 'Hashem is my strength and Hashem is my light'! Notice that they are Hebrew names and they have Hashem's Names embedded inside them. Many names of the nesi'im are like this. The midrash remarks that this is very surprising. One would think that after 210 years of living in Egypt, the Jews would start giving Egyptian names to their children!

What is a name? A name is how I identify who I am. If I go by the name Yaakov, since it is a clearly identifiable Jewish name – it means I am proud to belong to the Jewish people. But if I only use 'Yaakov' when I get called up to the Torah, but when I answer the phone I say "this is George speaking", then what am I saying about myself? It means I don't want to identify as a Jew unless I am in shul. When I am outside shul, my Jewish identity takes a back seat. To the world at large, I'm really George.

Every person uses their name, their clothing, and their language to identify who they are, and to which group they want to belong. Klal Yisroel merited to be redeemed because they proudly identified as Jews through their Jewish names, Jewish dress, and Jewish language – even in Egypt. Every language expresses a certain culture. And even as slaves, their culture was Jewish and this allowed them to leave Egypt.

Another critical point was made in the counting of Klal Yisroel. They are being divided according to shevet, which is determined by the father. The midrash tells us that this made the non-Jews remark cynically: If the Egyptians completely ruled over your bodies, don't you think they ruled over your wives as well? How can we know who anyone's true father is?

To respond to this, in Parshas Pinchas when another count is made before they enter Eretz Yisroel, there is an unusual addition to each name. Hashem puts a letter heh and yud before and after each family name to testify with the Name of Hashem that their lineage is pure. Hashem testified that the Jewish women were extremely modest even

when surrounded by a culture of znus and taivoh.

The Jewish women had a dual job in Egypt – they had to make themselves unattractive and socially unacceptable to any Egyptian man. (Out of all the women, there was only one woman who disregarded these precautions – Shlomis bas Divri). On the other hand, the women in Egypt made sure they were attractive to their husbands. They beautified themselves with copper mirrors that they later donated to the Mishkon. This is the dual aspect of the tzniyus and kedushoh of the Jewish woman – to go back-and-forth from having a completely modest presence in public – not getting the attention of any man – to an attractive private presence exclusive for their husbands at home.

Remember, they were living in the most decadent and immoral society – very similar to our society today. The Ohr HaChaim in Parshas Acharai Mos comments why the Torah introduces the parsha of arayos with the warning, “do not repeat the behavior of Egypt where you used to live and the Land of Canaan where you are going to”. We know that they lived in Egypt and are on the way to Canaan. Why was this emphasized here? It tells us over and over because we need to understand that every Jew must achieve a life of kedushoh no matter what his circumstances. We need to make strict boundaries to guard our neshomos. And if we don't make strict boundaries, we run the risk of destroying who we are as a people.

Each Jew has a tremendous potential for kedushoh. But the downside of having potential for kedushoh is the potential to defile that kedushoh. The Jewish neshomo has a unique capacity for kedushoh that non-Jews don't have. Anyone who is even slightly familiar with Rav Chaim Volozhin's Nefesh HaChaim knows that the neshomo of the Jew has the power to make a tremendous impact on the entire universe. His tzelem Elokim affects the highest realms of ruchniyus and he can either add kedushoh to them or destroy them with tumoh. Even though every human being was originally created with a tzelem Elokim, when Klal Yisroel accepted the Torah, the Jews were selected to be the vehicle to bring kedushoh or tumoh into this world. A non-Jew also has this potential tzelem Elokim which he can actualize when he converts.

We live in very, very difficult times. Our society today is totally preoccupied with znus. It is talked about non-stop at every opportunity. There is about to be a revolution in the United States because the Supreme Court is about to overturn the ruling that freely permitted abortions. People are probably going to react very violently against this ruling because the whole society over the past 60 years was developed around znus and taivoh without consequences – thanks to freely available abortions. Now it won't be so simple anymore, and this is going to upset a lot of people. This is the society we live in and

it affects us.

How did Klal Yisroel in Egypt maintain their kedushoh? They made strong boundaries. So yes, they were involved in avodo zoro and sunk in many aspects of ruchniyus. But they maintained the core of their neshomos as pure Jews because they protected their kedushoh with safeguards against arayos. This is why they merited to be redeemed and were able to accept the Torah.

Today, we are drowning in a world of non-stop znus. It is everywhere you look – everywhere you go. Why were Klal Yisroel able to have Hashem dwell His Shechinoh in their midst? How can He build a Mishkon with them? Because Hashem Himself could testify to the absolute fidelity between husband and wife in Egypt. That is what kept them pure and it is the only way we can protect ourselves.

People are talking about Moshiach all the time recently. It is not surprising given the wild times we are living in. The devastation from the war in Ukraine is on a scale that the world hasn't seen for decades. There is widespread economic collapse as a result. It is affecting the entire world. But read the signs given by the gemara at the end of Sotah for the troubling times before Moshiach. One of the signs is when they will make a 'beis vaad l'znus'.

The list starts with increased chutzpah, and out-of-control inflation even though there is great supply. Malchus will turn to minnus and there will be a beis vaad for znus. It means people are now gathering for znus in places which used to be where chachomim gathered. Which chachomim? It could be referring to universities. But Rashi says it is referring to places of Torah learning. You can't have both Torah and znus in the same place. Torah isn't just a type of chochmoh. You can't acquire it without being a kodosh. This isn't so for secular wisdom. You can be a great professor and a complete immoral low-life at the same time.

Rashi is talking about a strange reality where people will be learning Torah but their minds are involved with znus. It is a consequence of society falling apart around us.

There is a reason we routinely emphasize the need to make sure certain devices are not infiltrating the yeshiva. The only way Klal Yisroel survived Egypt with their identity intact was due to the boundaries the women made against znus. Only one woman failed out of all the millions of women. The Shechinoh can only dwell among us in the Mishkon if Hashem can testify that we have guarded our kedushoh. So while the world outside is totally consumed by taivoh and znus, the only way we can connect to Hashem through His Torah and have His Presence felt among us today is by making strong boundaries against taivoh and znus.