More Than a Number

By Eliana Goldenholz '26

פרשת במדבר begins with Hashem commanding משה to take a census of the Jewish people. The תורה says: "שְׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל" "take a census of the whole Israelite company" (במדבר א:ב). This raises a simple but important question: why does Hashem need to count the people? Isn't G-d all-knowing? And more than that, why now - at the beginning of ספר במדבר, just before the people begin their journey through the desert? What is the purpose behind this detailed counting?

רש״י addresses this in his explanation on the very first פסוק of the פרשה. He writes: because the Jewish people were dear to Him, He counts them every now and then. According to רש״י, the act of counting is not about statistics, rather, it is about love. Hashem counts בני ישראל as a way of showing care and affection. The census is a spiritual act that expresses God's close relationship with His people.

The רמב״ן, on the other hand, offers a more people-focused explanation. He explains that the census was done in a very personal way: each person would be mentioned by name before משה and אהרן. They would each be counted with respect and משה and אהרן would treat each one of בני ישראל with honor.

In רמב״ן's view, the census was not just a number - it was an opportunity for each individual to stand out and be recognized. By appearing before משה and אהרן and being counted by name, each person was reminded that they mattered. It gave people dignity and a sense of personal value within the community.

Both רש״י and רמב״ן teach us that being counted does not mean being reduced to a number. On the contrary, it means being seen, being valued, and being loved. Whether it is from God's perspective of love or the leaders' recognition of each individual, פרשת במדבר reminds us that every person counts.

Counting and Hashem's Love for Israel

By Nate Goldring '28

This week's פרשה, פרשת במדבר is made up mostly of numbers. In the second through seventh עלייה, the תורה talks about censuses, where משה counts the members of בני ישראל in different groups including the שבטים, the camping groups, the לוים and the לוים's different houses. But why is Hashem counting בני ישראל so many times in so many different ways?

רש״י explains that Hashem made a full census of בני ישראל three times. Once after they escaped Egypt, once more after the עגל הזהב and finally here right before He blesses them by resting His שכינה in the center of the camp. רש״י says, "מִתּוֹךְ חִבָּתָן לְפָנָיו מוֹנֶה אוֹתָם כָּל שָׁעָה" "from the flock he counts them every hour because they are dear to Him." This explains that רש״י believes the reason Hashem counts us so frequently is due to the fact that He holds us so dear.

Imagine that you collect coins, cards or other collectables. You may already know how many, or what types of the collectables you have; nevertheless, you continue to check on them counting them many times. רש״י explains in this that we are like the precious possessions of Hashem that He counts constantly to show His love and care for us.

When יעקב goes back across the river, which he and his family had just crossed to enter Israel, he retrieves his small jugs. How can we understand going back for something so small, when יעקב was extremely wealthy? On חולין צא. it is explained that the righteous are careful about all of their possessions, small and large. Hashem does the same on a much higher level. He counts each and every one of בני ישראל, making sure no one is left behind.

רש״י and the גמרא in חולין remind us of how important and dear to Hashem we are. This שבת, may we all merit to always know that Hashem is looking out for us and cares about and protects each and every member of כלל ישראל, with no exception.

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