

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT KI TISA

**“What is man, that You should remember him, and a mortal,
that You should count him?”**

By Rav Gad Eldad

a. **“Every man shall give a ransom for his soul”¹**

Our *parasha* begins with the description of a census of *Bnei Yisrael*, which was carried out by means of the half-shekel:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: When you take the sum of *Bnei Yisrael* by their number, every man shall give a ransom for his soul to the Lord when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them. This they shall give: every one that passes among them that are numbered, half a shekel according to the shekel of the Sanctuary; a shekel is twenty *gera*. A half-shekel shall be the offering of the Lord. Every one that passes among them that are numbered, from twenty years old and above, shall give the offering of the Lord. The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less than half a shekel, when they give the offering of the Lord, to make atonement for your souls. And you shall take the atonement money of *Bnei Yisrael* and shall appoint it for the service of the Tent of Meeting, that it may be a memorial for *Bnei Yisrael* before the Lord, to make atonement for your souls. (*Shemot* 30:11-16)

The content here is straightforward enough, but several peripheral questions arise. First, this unit seems altogether out of place in the text. Up until now, the subject has been the construction of the *Mishkan*, along with its vessels and related matters. It is not clear how the census has anything to do with this.² In addition, the commentators are divided as to whether the command conveyed here is applicable to future generations, or whether it is limited to a one-time census.³ As part of this discussion, they note that in other censuses described in *Tanakh*, no mention is made of any need for a

¹ See R. Elchanan Samet, “*Machatzit Ha-Shekel – Mitzva Le-Sha’ata o Mitzva Le-Dorot*,” *Iyunim Be-Parashat Ha-Shavua*, series III, pp. 420-444; Rabbanit Sharon Rimon, “*Machatzit Ha-Shekel*,” *Torat Etzion, Shemot*, pp. 393-400.

² One might have suggested that this unit appears after all the various commands relating to the *Mishkan* in order to serve as a transition between the fashioning of the *Mishkan* and the manner in which its service is to be performed (as the money that is collected will be used for the service). However, if this were indeed the intention, then the end of our unit should logically include a list of the people’s contributions to the *Mishkan*, but this detailed enumeration appears only in chapter 35.

³ See Ramban 30:12 and Abravanel (first question).

half-shekel.⁴

Furthermore, the reason given for counting by means of the half-shekel is to protect the people from a possible plague, but no explanation is given as to why a census would bring a plague. The commentators offer various possibilities. Some mention the *ayin ha-ra* (evil eye) accompanying the very act of counting.⁵ This approach in fact suggests that the census is so vitally important that it must be conducted despite the inherent danger. However, nowhere in the text do we find any mention of the need or reason for counting the people, nor do we find (here or anywhere else in *Tanakh*) that harm is caused by the *ayin ha-ra*. In addition, attention should be paid to the fact that according to the text in our *parasha*, the giving of the half-shekel is defined as a “ransom for the soul.” If the purpose of the half-shekel was to afford protection against the *ayin ha-ra*, the concept of a ransom for the soul would seemingly have no place.

b. **“Once a year he shall make atonement upon it”**

And you shall make an altar for the burning of incense: of shittim wood shall you make it... And Aharon shall burn upon it sweet incense every morning; when he dresses the lamps he shall burn incense on it... a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations... **And Aharon shall sprinkle upon its horns once a year the blood of the sin offering of atonement; once a year he shall make atonement upon it throughout your generations; it is most holy to the Lord.** (*Shemot* 30:1-10)

This unit, describing the incense altar and the manner in which its service is performed, concludes all the commands relating to the vessels of the *Mishkan*. The final verse here speaks not of the routine offering of incense, but rather of the purification (“atonement”) of the altar, performed once a year. This atonement is necessary so that the altar can continue to fulfill its function throughout the year. In this verse alone, the root *k-p-r* (atone) is repeated three times, but it also appears in the verses that follow – the unit pertaining to the census:

When you take the sum of *Bnei Yisrael* by their number, every man shall give a ransom for his soul

⁴ With the exception of two censuses carried out by Shaul, where the language of the text is not clear. In the war against Nachash, we read, “And he counted them in Bazek, and *Bnei Yisrael* were three hundred thousand, and the men of Yehuda – thirty thousand” (*Shmuel* I 11:8); in the war against Amalek, we read, “And Shaul gathered the people together, and counted them in Telaim – two hundred thousand footmen and ten thousand men of Yehuda” (*Shmuel* I 15:4). While some commentators maintain that “Bazek” and “Telaim” are merely names of places, others propose that these names refer to objects by means of which the count was made, following the example of the half-shekel in our *parasha*.

⁵ Rashi writes: “That there be no plague among them’ – for a counting is subject to the *ayin ha-ra*, and a plague befalls them, as we find in the time of David” (Rashi, *Shemot* 30:12). See also Abravanel’s lengthy explanation.

(*kofer nafsho*) to the Lord, when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them. (*Shemot* 30:12)

The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less than half a shekel, when they give the offering of the Lord, to make atonement for your souls (*le-khaper al nafshoteikhem*). (*Shemot* 30:15)

And you shall take the atonement money (*kesev ha-kippurim*) of *Bnei Yisrael* and shall appoint it for the service of the Tent of Meeting, that it may be a memorial for *Bnei Yisrael* before the Lord, to make atonement for your souls (*le-khaper al nafshoteikhem*). (*Shemot* 30:16)

Some of the commentators view the subject of atonement as the key to understanding the juxtaposition of the two units. Ibn Ezra writes:

[The text] starts setting forth the [subject of] atonement money, which is an obligation on each individual, not a voluntary contribution. And this is mentioned because of what appears above – that once a year atonement is made; and the atonement money is also [given] once a year, as will be explained below. (Ibn Ezra [long], *Shemot* 30:12)

This focus on the dimension of atonement as the reason for the location of this unit may guide us to a different understanding of the subject.

c. **“Every man shall give a ransom for his soul to the Lord, when you number them”**

When the Torah speaks of a census, it uses language derived from the root *p-k-d*. This is especially pronounced in *Sefer Bamidbar*, which for this reason is also referred to as *Chumash ha-Pekudim* (the *Chumash* of counting):

These are those that were numbered [*ha-pekudim*], whom Moshe numbered [*pakad*], with Aharon and the princes of Israel, being twelve men, each representing his father's house. So all those who were numbered [*pekudei*] of *Bnei Yisrael*, by their fathers' houses, from twenty years old and upward, all who were able to go forth to war in Israel... (*Bamidbar* 1:44-45)

The adherence to this expression is notable in view of the fact that the root *s-p-r*, meaning “counting,” exists in the Torah – as we find, for example, in the context of counting the *Omer*.⁶

And you shall count (*sefartem*) for yourselves from the morrow after the Shabbat, from the day that you

⁶ Or counting towards the *Yovel* (Jubilee) year: “And you shall count (*ve-safarta*) for yourself seven *shabbatot* of years...” (*Vayikra* 25:8). Likewise, concerning the *zava* we read, “And when he who has an issue is cleansed of his issue, then he shall count (*ve-safar*) for himself seven days for his cleansing...” (*Vayikra* 15:13); and concerning the *zava*: “But if she is cleansed of her issue then she shall count (*ve-safra*) for herself seven days, and after that she shall be clean” (*Vayikra* 15:28). We find the same verb used concerning objects: “And He took him outside and said, ‘Look now towards heaven, and count (*sefor*) the stars, if you are able to count (*le-spor*) them.’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your seed be.’”

brought the *omer* of the wave offering, seven complete *shabbatot* shall there be; to the morrow after the seventh *shabbat* shall you count (*tisperu*) fifty days, and you shall offer a new meal offering to the Lord. (*Vayikra* 23:15-16)

There is yet another verb – *m-n-h* – that the Torah uses, with the same meaning:

And I shall make your seed like the dust of the earth, so that if a man is able to count (*le-mnot*) the dust of the earth, then your seed shall also be counted (*yimaneh*). (*Bereishit* 13:16)

We might sum up by saying that when it is people who are counted, the Torah adheres to the root *p-k-d*.⁷ When the counting involves something else, we find *s-p-r* and *m-n-h*.⁸ It remains for us to explore the significance of this distinction.

d. **“I shall surely remember (*pakod pakadeti*) you”**

The root *p-k-d* also appears in other contexts, as, for instance, in the message of redemption when *Am Yisrael* is in Egypt:

Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, “The Lord God of your fathers – the God of Avraham, of Yitzchak and of Yaakov – has appeared to me, saying: I have surely remembered (*pakadeti*) you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt.” (*Shemot* 3:16)

On the basis of other appearances of this term in *Tanakh*, we understand that the *pekida* here is meant in the sense of “remembering”.⁹

⁷ We find the root *s-p-r* used in connection with people, but not in the context of a count or census; rather, it refers to a total number: “And the Lord said to Moshe: Count (*pekod*) all the firstborn of the males of *Bnei Yisrael* from a month old and upward, and take the number (*mispar*) of their names” (*Bamidbar* 3:40). See also *Devarim* 32:8; *Shoftim* 7:6; *Divrei Ha-Yamim* I 27:1, and elsewhere.

⁸ The commentators address in different ways the question of the census in the time of David, which brought a plague upon the people. Without getting into the details of the episode, we propose that the text hints to the idea that the execution was flawed through its use of expressions that seemingly do not belong in a population census: “And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to count (*le-mnot*) Israel. And David said to Yoav and to the rulers of the people, ‘Go, count (*sifru*) Israel, from Beer Sheva to Dan, and bring [the total] to me, that I may know their number [*misparam*]... And Yoav gave the sum of the number [*mispar mifkad*] of the people to David, and all of Israel were one million one hundred thousand men who drew the sword; and Yehuda was four hundred and seventy thousand men that drew the sword. But he did not count (*lo pakad*) Levi and Binyamin among them, for the king's word was as abhorrent to Yoav” (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* I 21:1-7). In the parallel account in *Sefer Shmuel*, we likewise find that the root *m-n-h* is used: “And again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, ‘Go, number (*meneh*) Israel and Yehuda” (*Shmuel* II 24:1). Following the count we find: “And David's heart smote him after he had numbered (*safar*) the people, and David said to the Lord, ‘I have sinned greatly in that which I have done; and now, O Lord, take away, I pray You, the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly’” (*Shmuel* II 24:10).

⁹ On the verse, “And you shall know that your tent is at peace, and you shall visit (*pakadeta*) your habitation, and shall miss nothing” (*Iyov* 5:24), Metzudat Tzion (ad loc.) comments: “[The term] *pakadeta* is meant in the

Why does the Torah use the term “*pekida*” – remembering – in the context of counting people? Rabbenu Bechayei explains as follows:

“Every man shall give a ransom for his soul to the Lord, when you number them” – [this refers to the census] in the desert; “that there be no plague among them when you number them” – [this refers to any future census,] for all generations, and it is for this reason that the expression “when you number them” is repeated. Alternatively, it may be that the first [appearance of the expression *be-fkod otam*] is meant in the sense of “counting,” while the second [appearance] is meant in the sense of “punishment,” as in, “... in the time of their punishment [*pekudatam*] they shall perish” (*Yirmiyahu* 10:15). Hence, the text is saying, “Every man shall give a ransom for his soul to the Lord” – when they are counted, so that they will not suffer a plague when He remembers/watches over/punishes them.

The text reveals that the people, counted here individually by number, is watched over by Divine Providence; the deeds of each one are set forth before God, and then a plague might befall him. This was not the case beforehand, when he was simply a member of the collective. Now that each individual stands on his own, with all his deeds set forth, it is not possible that there will be no punishment. This is the message behind the Shunamite woman’s answer to Elisha (*Melakhim* II 4:3), “I dwell amongst my people” – in other words, I do not wish for you to beseech the king or the head of the army on my behalf; better that my case be included within the collective, rather than set forth individually, lest I be punished. And we know that the verse, “And it happened that day...” (ibid., verse 11) alludes to Rosh Ha-Shana. On that day, everyone in the world passes before Him one by one, like sheep, such that it is a day of judgment and a remembrance for punishment for the world, and cause for fear and anxiety, since each individual is examined and each of his actions is examined, as the prophet says (*Yirmiyahu* 32:19), “to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.” (Rabbenu Bechayei, *Shemot* 30:12)

In general, we are used to thinking that counting (i.e., adding up to a collective total) blurs the details of each individual included in the count. It seems that the deliberate use of the term *pekida* is meant to highlight the opposite idea: each individual is exposed, for the good and for the bad, as he is counted. For at least that short moment, all eyes are on him. On the technical level, he is just one more unit added to the total, but in spiritual terms, he is exposed – and this exposure comes with a price. This is the deeper significance of the census. The census removes the social padding that surrounds the individual and exposes him, even just for a fraction of a second, to the harsh

sense of remembering and keeping a record, as in, ‘I have surely remembered...’ (*Shemot* 3:16).” The same idea is conveyed in the verse, “And now go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you; behold, My angel shall go before you; nevertheless, on the day when I remember/punish (*be-yom pokdi*), I will remember/punish (*pakadeti*) their sin to them.” See also Ibn Ezra ad loc.

glare of evaluation.

This being the case, the Torah prescribes a “ransom of the soul” as a precaution lest the result of the exposure be negative and harmful. There must surely be many people who have no need for this ransom of the soul, but since the census covers the whole population, it is likely that someone may be harmed by the exposure, and therefore everyone must prepare.

This understanding of the danger does not rule out the possibility of conducting a census; it merely requires the preventive measure of a “ransom of the soul.” There is no inherent need for the count to be conducted via some other object.¹⁰

e. **“That it may be a remembrance for Israel before the Lord”**

Let us now try to understand the timing of the census and its purpose. Surprisingly, although the Torah devotes several verses to the instructions regarding the census, there is not a word about it actually being carried out. We find only indirect and incidental reference to it as part of the description of the use to which the money is put:

And the silver **of those that were numbered of the congregation** was a hundred talents, and a thousand seven hundred and seventy five shekels, according to the shekel of the Sanctuary – a *beka* for every man, that is, half a shekel, according to the shekel of the Sanctuary, **for everyone who went to be numbered, from twenty years old and upward, for six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty men.** And of the hundred talents of silver were cast the sockets of the Sanctuary, and the sockets of the veil; a hundred sockets of the hundred talents, a talent for a socket. And of the thousand seven hundred and seventy five shekels he made hooks of the pillars, and overlaid their capitals, and bound them. (*Shemot* 38:25-28)

The ignoring of the census and its results opens the door to further reflection. Perhaps the census itself is not the main point; perhaps it is merely a means to an entirely different end.

We noted that our unit continues on from the previous one in terms of the idea of atonement. In fact, one of the most elementary functions of the *Mishkan* was to serve as a place of atonement. However, the Torah makes it clear that in order to serve in this capacity, the *Mishkan* itself requires “atonement.” We find:

Seven days you shall **make an atonement for the altar**, and sanctify it, and it shall be an altar most holy; whatever touches the altar shall be holy. (*Shemot* 29:37)

Likewise, the concluding verse concerning the incense altar reads:

And Aharon shall sprinkle upon its horns once a year

¹⁰ Countering Rashi’s explanation about the *ayin ha-ra* (see note 5 above), Abravanel points out that it is still actually heads (*gulgolot*) that are counted (and not coins), while the “atonement money” is collected in parallel.

the blood of the sin offering of atonement; **once a year he shall make atonement upon it** throughout your generations; it is most holy to the Lord. (*Shemot* 30:10)

And the concluding verse of our own unit, concerning the half-shekel donation, reads:

And you shall take the atonement money of *Bnei Yisrael* and shall appoint it for the service of the Tent of Meeting, that it may be a **memorial of *Bnei Yisrael* before the Lord, to make atonement for your souls.** (*Shemot* 30:16)

From this perspective, we might propose that the Torah seeks to create a situation whereby *Am Yisrael*, comprised of every individual Jew, is permanently included within the mechanism of atonement in the *Mishkan*. To this end, the atonement of the nation must be eternalized in the structure of the *Mishkan*. The nation's atonement cannot be commemorated in the structure of the *Mishkan* by means of the free-will offerings, since the participation in them is not equal among all the people. Atonement for the nation as a whole requires equal representation.

This analysis turns the situation around. Now there is in fact no need for the census itself. Therefore, the Torah makes no effort to record its being held. All that is necessary is some sort of mechanism by means of which the "atonement money" of each and every Israelite will find its way into the structure of the *Mishkan* and be part of its character of "atonement." To achieve this end, the usual procedure for a census is employed – but the census itself is not the aim; rather, it serves as a way for every individual to give a ransom for his soul, to be a part of the *Mishkan* and thereby bring about the desired outcome: a constant remembrance of *Bnei Yisrael* before God.¹¹

According to what we have said above, it is clear why the census is not described as a command – because the point is not the census, but rather the atonement money that is collected by means of the census and which is used in the *Mishkan*. It is also clear why in the census descriptions in the future, the text makes no mention of the half-shekel or of any other substitute for the purposes of counting, because there the order of importance was the other way around: the census was the important aim, while the half-shekel was simply the means of carrying it out.¹²

f. **"To give the offering of the Lord"**

¹¹ Attention should be paid to the fact that the aspect of our *parasha* that leaves its impression for all future generations, via the Oral Law, is the obligation of an annual donation for the sacrificial service in the Temple, with no need for a census. Thus, it appears that even when the process was implemented, the census was of secondary importance.

¹² This dimension comes into sharper focus in light of R. Samet's conclusion (see above, note 1) that the census described here is the same one that we find at the beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*. If this is so, then in these two places, the Torah relates to different aspects of the same census in different contexts. In addition, what distinguishes our census from others is that in other censuses the coin or object was not fixed for future generations, but rather was used only once. For this reason, no mention is made of it.

The idea of atonement features prominently in the verses framing our unit, at the beginning and the end. In the body of the unit, in contrast, the text refers to the money collected through the census as an "offering of the Lord":

When you take the sum of *Bnei Yisrael* by their number, every man shall give a ransom for his soul to the Lord, when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them. This they shall give: every one that passes among them that are numbered, half a shekel according to the shekel of the Sanctuary; a shekel is twenty *gera*. A half-shekel shall be **the offering of the Lord**. Every one that passes among them that are numbered, from twenty years old and above, shall give **the offering of the Lord**. The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less than half a shekel, when **they give the offering of the Lord, to make atonement for your souls**. And you shall take the atonement money of *Bnei Yisrael* and shall appoint it for the service of the Tent of Meeting, that it may be a memorial for *Bnei Yisrael* before the Lord, to make atonement for your souls. (*Shemot* 30:12-16)

It seems that the emphasis on the dimension of the "offering of the Lord" reinforces our conclusion. Ultimately, the focus of our unit is an additional channel of donation/sacrifice to God, rather than a census for its own sake. The half-shekel collected by means of the census is part of the broader campaign for the construction of the *Mishkan*, as announced in *Parashat Teruma*, with the expression "offering" alluding to that call:

Speak to *Bnei Yisrael* that they bring Me an offering; of every man whose heart prompts him to give shall you take My offering. (*Shemot* 25:2).

Up until now, the call for this offering has been directed to "every man whose heart prompts him to give." It would seem, therefore, that the climax of our unit is the expression that combines the two concepts together:

... when they give the offering of the Lord, to make atonement for your souls. (*Shemot* 30:15)

This expression would appear to complement the previous call. The innovation here is that "the offering of the Lord" is characterized by giving, but may also include an element of atonement. These are the same two dimensions that characterize the sacrifices in the *Mishkan* that will be detailed later.

At the same time, the Torah also hints that even "atonement" that is given in response to a command is an "offering of the Lord," not just a free-will gift. Giving prompted by the heart and ransom of the soul are two dimensions that nourish one another, jointly purifying man and bringing him closer to God.

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