



**BADERECH**

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# Beyond Numbers

Rebbe Yitzchak of Vorka, zy'a, was respected for his deep, inner work, and beloved for the close friendship that defined his Chasidic court. Once, one of his Chasidim, R' Yankel, needed to marry off his daughter, but lacked the funds for dowry. He approached his good friend and neighbor R' Moishe, and asked for a loan of 1,000 rubles, promising that he would do everything he could to pay back the money right after the wedding.

R' Moishe happily lent him the money, suspecting that his friend wouldn't be able to follow through with his good intentions to repay anytime soon. And that's what happened. Years passed and R' Yankel was never able to get the money together. Then, money became tight for R' Moishe as well, and the friends awkwardly avoided the issue of the debt.

One day, R' Moishe happened to see Rebbe Yitzchok on the way to visit R' Yankel. R' Moishe stepped out onto the street, hoping for an opportunity to broach the sensitive subject; perhaps the Rebbe would help broker a solution to the outstanding loan. R' Moishe was

successful and the Rebbe agreed to speak with the two friends together.

"My dear Yankeleh," said the Rebbe in a soothing, low voice, "the time has come for you to repay your debt to Moishe." The Rebbe was fully aware that there was no real possibility for the simple yid to gather the funds, but he also knew of Yankel's sincerity of heart, and that Hashem would help.

Yankel went and turned over his house searching for anything he could find. Half a rubble here, a kopek there... After searching high and low, he came up with a whopping total of 57 rubles. The Rebbe smiled at Yankel with gratitude, then closed his eyes and entered a meditative state. With deep *kavana*, intention and concentration, he then proceeded to count the rubles one by one: 1, 2, 3... 55, 56, 57... However, the Rebbe didn't stop there, and continued counting the same 57 coins, over and over again until counting the small pile of rubles a thousand times.

With a joyful wink, the Rebbe pushed the small pile of coins across the table to R' Moishe, and told him, "Here is your 1,000 rubles!"

Soon thereafter, R' Moishe became the most wealthy *gvur* in Vorka.

Our sedra opens with these verses: "Hashem spoke to Moshe, *Bamidbar Sinai*, saying, 'Take the sum of all *Bnei Yisrael*, by families following their fathers' houses; a head count of every male according to the number of their names... you and Aharon shall count them.'"(1:1-3) This begins another census of



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the Jewish People, and Moshe and Aharon are instructed once again to collect half-shekels to make this accounting of Am Yisrael.

Rashi tells us that we are directed to count Am Yisrael “often”: *mitoch chibasan l’fanav*, “because they are dear to Him.... When they left Egypt He counted them; when many fell because of the Sin of the Golden Calf, He counted them to know the number of the survivors; when He came to cause His Divine Presence to rest among them, He counted them. On the first of Nissan, the Mishkan was erected, and on the first of Iyar, He counted them.”

A Divinely mandated census aims not just to clarify how many Jews there are, but also to “lift up the heads” of Am Yisrael and show that every one of us is important and beloved. When we each contribute a half shekel, we express our value as part of an inseparable whole.

Rabbeinu Bachayei explains the reason for the *hanhaga*, the custom we have until this day of not counting people individually: as individuals, we may not have enough personal *zechus* or merit to withstand judgment, so we refrain from singling anyone out. However, when we are counted as part of a community, even if an individual is lacking merit, the shared spiritual assets and identity as part of the larger whole is always meritorious.

The incessant counting of Am Yisrael

suggests that ‘we count’ in an infinite way. Hashem sees us in terms of His promise that we will be as the stars and the sand — uncountable in quantity, as well as measureless in quality.

In the world of nature, the act of counting is a quantification, defining and limiting the amount that is observed. This is a cold, objective assessment, the goal being an abstraction, a specific number. However, Tiferes Shlomo of Radomsk teaches that the counting of Am Yisrael has to be done specifically by Moshe and Aharon, the *tzadikim* of the generation. With eyes of *chiba*, love, they see the infinite worth of each individual in Klal Yisrael. They understand the value of the struggles and small victories of each person, and the infinite treasure of every mitzvah they perform, whether in ease or under duress.

Imagine for a moment the immeasurable value of all the *mitzvos* and acts of kindness, all the impassioned words of prayer and *emunah*, and all the loving self-sacrifices of every Jew throughout history.... May we be blessed with the ability to count as the *tzadikim* — and to know our own infinite worth! ■

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