
פרשת במדבר

פרק א פסוק א

וַיִּדְבֹר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי בְּאֶהָל מוֹעֵד בְּאַחַד לַחֲדָשׁ הַשְּׁנַי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִית לְצֵאתָם
מִצְרָיִם מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר:

רש"י

מתוך חֲבֵתוֹ לְפָנָיו מוֹנֶה אוֹתָם כָּל שְׁעָה. כְּשִׁיזָאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם מְנַאֵן, וּכְשִׁנְפְּלוּ בְּעַגְל מְנַאֵן לִידַע
[מְנַנֵּן] הַנּוֹתָרִים, כְּשִׁבָּא לְהַשְׁרוֹת שְׁכִינָתוֹ עֲלֵיהֶם מְנַאֵם. בְּאַחַד בְּנִיסָן הוּקַם הַמִּשְׁכָּן וּבְאַחַד
בְּאִיר מְנַאֵם:

מושג

מתוך חֲבֵתוֹ לְפָנָיו מוֹנֶה אוֹתָם כָּל שְׁעָה.

Translation:

Due to their dearness to Him, He counts them often.

Explanation:

The people of Israel are counted three times before Hashem rests His presence upon them. Each time was after an event that served to actually ‘filter’ the people. The first was the ‘furnace’ of Egypt and finally מַכַּת הוֹשֶׁךְ, which eliminated those unworthy of redemption. The second were the punishments meted out after the עַגְל הַזֶּהָב, in which any person who had in any way worshipped the עַגְל died. Again, all those who had any defect of idol worship within them were ‘filtered’ out. And finally, the last filter was the building of the מִשְׁכָּן in which the proximity to Hashem’s abode acted as a filter which removed all those who could not withstand the demands of such a holy environment.

The fact that Hashem cared to count us after each such event reveals how dear we are to Him, just as one cares to count his wheat in order to know the amount from which he will benefit. Even though Hashem does not need this census, He commands Moshe to count the people in order to let the people know how dear they are to Him. Pithily put, He counts us to let us know that to Him we count¹.

Looking in the Pasuk:

The commentaries wonder why Rashi chose to explain the reason for the census here and not on the following Pasuk in which the command to count the people is mentioned².

¹ See Notes 2

² See Notes 1

NOTES

1. It is rather strange that Rashi should write his commentary on this Pasuk. After all, the first Pasuk does not yet tell us what Hashem commands Moshe, only the date on which He spoke to him. It would seem more appropriate for Rashi to wait until the next Pasuk in which Hashem commands Moshe to count the people to tell us of Hashem's חיבה for ישראל. Why did Rashi comment here?

Our Musag focuses on the fact that Hashem counted בני ישראל on three different occasions. While this in itself is not particularly worthy of note, what caught the attention of Chazal was the fact that these three countings took place within a very short span of time: one year and one month. Thus, the term מונה אותן כל שעה should not be taken to mean that Hashem counts them constantly – as three times would certainly not justify such a conclusion – but rather that He, at one point, counted them frequently, that is to say multiple times within a short time span.

What were the three times? Rashi points to the counting when they left מצרים, in which the Pasuk tells us:

וַיִּסְעוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִרְעַמְסֵס סִפְתָּהּ כְּשֵׁשׁ־מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף רִגְלֵי הַגְּבָרִים לְבַד מִטָּף (שמות יב:לז):

The third counting takes place here one year and one month after the first counting. When the second counting - which Rashi tells us was to ascertain how many remained after the sin of the Golden Calf – took place is somewhat unclear. Most probably it refers to the counting that took place in פרשת כי תשא in which a מחצית השקל was given as a contribution towards the fashioning of the אדנים for the משכן.³ The fact that this counting took place sometime after יום כיפור in the first year after leaving מצרים, tells us that less than seven months had elapsed between the second and third counting.

What is truly amazing is that the sum of the second counting – 603,550 – is exactly the same as the sum of the third counting in our Parsha⁴. While the Ramban here discusses this phenomena and how it could have happened, the fact that the numbers were identical helps us understand Rashi. One might mistakenly think that the counting here and in כי תשא were the same census, the proof being the identical numbers. If so, two censuses within 13 months, one upon leaving Egypt and this counting, would not prove our Musag. Only from the fact that the Torah tells us that this counting took place *after* the erecting of the משכן, in the second month of the second year, do we understand that this was a different counting than the counting for the אדנים which took place *before* the משכן was built. Therefore, Rashi taught our Musag on this Pasuk, for only from this Pasuk do we know that indeed מונה אותן בכל שעה.

2. There are many questions regarding this Rashi and the meaning of our Musag:

- a. If Hashem is counting the people here as a prerequisite to His resting His שכונה among them, why does Hashem wait a full month after the erecting of the משכן to count them?
- b. Why does counting בני ישראל display חביבות? Many answer by comparing our Musag to one who loves money and sits and counts his coins obsessively even though he knows how many he has. However, this comparison is false. Here Hashem counts the people each time for a very specific reason as Rashi teaches. Also, counting them three times could hardly be compared to one who is obsessed with his wealth and counts his coins incessantly.
- c. Surely Hashem knows how many people there are, so why the need to count them?

³ בָּקַע לְגִלְגָּלֶת מִחֻצֵיט הַשֶּׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ לְכֹל הָעֵבֶר עַל־הַפְּקָדִים מִבְּנֵי עֶשְׂרִים וְשָׁנָה וּמֵעֵלָה לְשֵׁשׁ־מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף וּשְׁלֹשֶׁת אֲלָפִים וְחֲמִשׁ מֵאוֹת וְחֲמִשִּׁים: (שמות לח:כו).

⁴ אֵלֶּה פְּקוּדֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם כָּל־פְּקוּדֵי הַמִּחֲנֶה לְצַבָּאתָם שֵׁשׁ־מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף וּשְׁלֹשֶׁת אֲלָפִים וְחֲמִשׁ מֵאוֹת וְחֲמִשִּׁים: (ב:לב).

In order to understand we must look for Rashi's source. While there does not seem to be a Midrash that precisely matches Rashi's wording, the מדרש תנחומא offers insight into Rashi's thinking:

בטנך ערמת חטים (שיר השירים ז:ג): למה נמשלו לחטים? מה ערמת חטים זו נכנסה לאוצר במנין ויוצאה במנין, אף כאן אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא, שיהיו נמנין בכל שעה. לכך נאמר, בטנך ערמת חטים. אבל התבן והקש אינן נמנין ולא נמדדין. כך אומות העולם נמשלין כתבן וכקש, שנאמר, יהיו כמוץ לפני רוח (תהלים לה:ה). וכן הוא אומר, ובית עשו לקש (עובדיה א:יח). למה? שאין לו להקדוש ברוך הוא מהן הנאה, שנאמר, כל הגוים כאין נגדו, מאפס ותוהו נחשבו לו (ישעיה מ:ז). אבל ישראל להקדוש ברוך הוא, הנאה לו בהן, קורין קריאת שמע ומתפללין, ומברכין שמו בכל יום ובכל שעה על כל דבר ודבר, לפיכך הם נמנין בכל שעה. ולכך נמשלו בחטים, בטנך ערמת חטים:

The Midrash speaks of one counting his wheat when he puts it into storage and when he removes it from storage. It is quite obvious that the purpose of this second counting is to ascertain exactly how much wheat remains, as some wheat spoils or is eaten by rodents. This is important to him because he plans on benefiting from the wheat, necessitating an exact accounting. If he did not receive benefit from the wheat he would not bother recounting as it would serve no purpose. If we are to apply this משל to our Pasuk it would teach us that we are dear to Hashem because we serve Him. He counts us to show us that we are important to Him and that our service is meaningful to Him. In effect, He does not count us for His benefit, but for ours.

If we are to analyze the משל even further we would understand not only why we are counted but also when. Just like the wheat is counted when being taken out of storage, so too בני ישראל were counted when they were taken out of Egypt. In addition, at any juncture in which the wheat might have undergone a change of status that might have reduced its numbers, it would be counted again. So too בני ישראל. Hashem will display His love for us by recounting us whenever a change of numbers might have taken place. This is the meaning of מונה אותן בכל שעה.

Therefore the commentary of Rashi becomes easily understood. Leaving מצרים was the first time we are counted, as we enter the service of Hashem and begin to benefit Him. After the sin of the עגל Hashem counts us again as the sin and its resulting punishment necessitated a new census. Later, there was yet another event which affected the status of the people, potentially reducing their numbers, and thus necessitating a third census. This was the building of the משכן.

To explain why the building of the משכן should be considered such an event we must understand the impact the משכן had on the people.

The Pasuk at the beginning of (ויקרא כו:יא) says:

וְנִתִּי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְלֹא־תִגְעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם:

And I will place My Sanctuary among you and My Spirit will not reject you.

The Pasuk is extremely difficult to understand. The previous פסוקים spoke of a time when the people were doing the will of Hashem: אם בחקותי תלכו וכו', and that they would be rewarded with the building of the משכן and the ensuing close relationship with Hashem: (שם יב). It would seem we are talking about a very ideal time, thus leading us to be rather shocked when Hashem tells them that He will not reject them: ולא תגעל נפשי אתכם. Why would we think that Hashem would reject them?

The answer is that when Hashem comes to live in our neighborhood, so to speak, His expectations regarding our behavior rise accordingly. This is reflected in the words of הז"ל when they teach us in (מסכת יבמות קכא):

וְסִבִּיבּוֹ נִשְׁעָרָה מְאֹד⁵ (תהלים נג:ג), מלמד, שהקדוש ברוך הוא מדקדק עם סביביו⁶ כחוט השערה. ר' חנינא אמר, מהכא: (תהלים פ"ט) אֵל נִעְרָץ בְּסוּד־קְדוּשִׁים רַבָּה וְנוֹרָא עַל־פְּלִ-סְבִיבּוֹ:

⁵ בַּאֲלֵהֵינוּ וְאֵלֵי־יְהוָה אֲשֶׁל־פָּנָיו תֹּאכַל וְסִבִּיבּוֹ נִשְׁעָרָה מְאֹד:

⁶ Even though we usually hear this הז"ל as reading מדקדק עם צדיקין, this exact wording does not actually appear in הז"ל. The closest I could find was in the (פרשת בלק רמז תשעא) which reads: שמדקדק הקדוש ברוך הוא עם הצדיקים אפילו כחוט השערה.

Just being in close proximity to the שכניה is in itself a true test which only the righteous can withstand. Hashem's presence acts as a type of purification process, which cleanses away⁷ all those who do not rise to the required standard. Therefore Hashem informs us that if בחקותי תלכו then you will merit having my שכניה among you without worrying about the proximity to Hashem causing Hashem to reject you.

Before Hashem is ready to finally rest His שכניה upon us, before He is ready to walk among us – ונתתי משכני בתוכם (פסוק יא) – He first places His משכן within us – והתכלתי בתוכם (פסוק יב). This building of the משכן is thus the final stage of selection, which takes place on the first of ניסן one month before He comes להשרות שכנינו with the final counting.

Thus, in the end result, the people of Israel are counted three times before Hashem rests His presence upon them⁸. Each time was after an event that served to actually 'filter' the people. The first was the 'furnace' of Egypt⁹ and finally מכת חושך, which eliminated those unworthy of redemption. The second were the punishments¹⁰ meted out after the עגל הזהב, in which any person who had in any way worshipped the עגל died. Again, all those who had any defect of idol worship within them were 'filtered' out. And finally, the last filter was the building of the משכן in which the proximity to Hashem's abode acted as a filter which removed all those who could not withstand the demands of such a holy environment. The fact that Hashem cared to count us after each such event reveals how dear we are to Him, just as one cares to count his wheat in order to know the amount from which he will benefit. Even though Hashem does not need this census, He commands Moshe to count the people in order to let the people know how dear they are to Him. Pithily put, He counts us to let us know that to Him we count.

Questions for Further Thought:

- a. If counting בני ישראל shows how dear they are to Hashem, why does counting them directly cause a plague? And, if for some reason counting the people is so dangerous, why didn't Hashem find another way to display his affection?
- b. Do you think the concept of counting things to show how dear they are to us might apply to other מצוות that require counting such as ספירת העומר?

⁷ It is therefore completely accurate to use the word תגעל נפשי. For Hashem's closeness acts as a process of הגעלה, in the same fashion as one who burns away impurity from a vessel. This is consistent with Rashi's comment on this Pasuk: כָּל אֲנֵילָהּ לְשׁוֹן פְּלִיטַת דָּבָר הַבְּלוּעַ בְּדָבָר.

⁸ This would explain why Rashi does not mention the counting that takes place after the episode of Korach (פרשת פנחס פרק כו א-נא). There too the people are counted and the reason given (see Rashi הגמפה כו:א ד"ה ויהי אחרי המגפה) parallels our Midrash here. Why did Rashi ignore this counting? According to our thinking, however, the multiple countings mentioned by Rashi were only to lead up to the השרת השכניה.

⁹ The Novi (מלכים א פרק ה פסוק נא) calls כור הברזל מצרים, the iron furnace.

¹⁰ Rashi, on שמות לב:כ ד"ה וישק, quotes the גמרא (מד.) in עבודה זרה which compares these punishments to the waters which test the unfaithful wife.

וַיִּשָׁק אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. נִתְכַּוְּנוּ לְבָדָקָם פְּסוּטוֹת. וְשֵׁלֵשׁ מִיתוֹת נִדְוְנוּ שָׁם, אִם יֵשׁ עֲדִים וְהִתְרָאָה, בְּסִיף, כְּמִשְׁפַּט אֲנָשֵׁי עִיר הַנְּדָמָה שָׁהוּ מֵרַבִּין. עֲדִים בְּלֹא הִתְרָאָה, בְּמַגְפָּה, שְׁנַאֲמַר "וַיִּגְפֵּה ה' אֶת הָעָם". לֹא עֲדִים וְלֹא הִתְרָאָה, בְּהִדְרוֹקוֹ, שְׂבָדָקוֹם הַפְּיִים וְצָבוּ בְּטַנְיָהֶם.