

## Take a census of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael according to their families, according to their father's household. (1:2)

The Torah relates the command that all Jews be counted in the census. It is in the following *pasuk* that the Torah states the criterion of twenty years and older. Is it “all” or a select group? The *Ben Ish Chai* explains this with an incident in which he had been personally involved. He heard someone slandering the Jewish community, claiming that in their home in Europe, they had desecrated *Shabbos* and flagrantly had eaten unkosher food. He asserted that this was the tip of the iceberg, as he continued his denigration of a large segment of the Jewish community.

The *Ben Ish Chai* asked the man what had possessed him to so disparage the Jewish community. The man's response is what we would expect to hear from someone of his ilk. “Why are you condemning me? Since when am I charged with seeking out and finding positive merit concerning those who flagrantly transgress the Torah?” The *Ben Ish Chai's* reply was classic and should serve as the barometer for our relationship with Jews who have yet to become observant. He replied, “*Yeish v'yeish*; there are those, and there are those. (There are two types of people/sinners.) It behooves us to take their background and Jewish identity into consideration.” He went on to explain, “There are those non-observant Jews who commit every sin, flagrantly profane Hashem's Torah and *mitzvos*. When push comes to shove, however, they probably retain their Jewish identity.”

The *Ben Ish Chai* supported his response with a story. A distinguished Jewish leader was invited to attend a large festive dinner at the palace of the king. The Jew's presence was a thorn in the eyes of one of the ministers, who harbored virulent animus toward the Jew. Sparked by envy and nurtured by *Eisav soneh l'Yaakov*, the irrational, implacable hatred that the descendants of Eisav fixate against the descendants of Yaakov, the Jew's presence at the dinner was enough to destroy the minister's appetite. He went so far as to hire a group of ruffians to stand in front of the palace and scream, “Jew! Jew!” in the nastiest manner when the Jewish friend of the king entered the palace.

Interestingly, when the Jew walked by the howling of the ruffians, he took out a bag of 1,000 gold ruble, and gave it to them. He accompanied his “gift” with a resounding, “Thank you! I am so happy that you called me a Jew. This is the identity that I want to maintain.” He explained, “I cannot say that I am a perfect Jew. My business interests and government connections make great demands on my spiritual connection with the Almighty. As long as someone calls me a Jew, however, it does not matter to me – even if he is doing this negatively, out of animus. He reminds me that regardless of my actions, I will always be a Jew in his eyes. As a result, I have a deep sense of conviction that one day I will be able to perform *teshuvah*, repent, and put all of this behind me.”

The *Ben Ish Chai* concluded, “This is the *limud z’chus*, positive merit that should be advocated on behalf of these European Jews. It is wrong to judge them negatively. As long as they identify with the Jewish people, we have hope they will return to full commitment. To write them off the way that you do is wrong.”

We return to the *Se’u es rosh kol adas Bnei Yisrael, l’mishpechosam l’veis avosam*. Yes, it is true that there are many of our brothers and sisters who have manifested a serious breach in their commitment. For the most part, many of them have never been aware of what a Torah life means and how to live it. As long as they are *l’mishpechosam l’veis avosam*, they maintain a connection with their Jewish family and Jewish pedigree, they are to be counted. As long as they are concerned to marry within the faith and retain Jewish blood in their lineage, they are to be counted. It is so easy to belittle someone. In fact, it does not take a brilliant mind to find reason to disparage. It does, however, take a warm heart with a passion for *Yiddishkeit* not to give up on a Jew.