

“Take a census of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael according to their families, according to their fathers’ household.” (1:2)

Rashi explains that as a result of Klal Yisrael’s dearness to Hashem, He counts them all of the time. The Mishkan, the site of the Revelation of the Divine Presence, was erected on Rosh Chodesh Nissan. On the following month, Rosh Chodesh Iyar, Hashem counted them. The commentators struggle with the thirty-day lapse between the time the Mishkan was erected and the time Hashem counted Klal Yisrael. One would think that because of Hashem’s great love for Klal Yisrael, He would count them on the most auspicious day, the day the Mishkan was erected. A number of reasons are given for this delay. Sifsei Chachamim explain that in order to establish residence, one must reside in a home for a minimum of thirty days. Thus, Hashem reposed in the Mishkan for thirty days before counting Klal Yisrael.

Horav Shmuel Vosner, Shlita, offers a practical reason for waiting until Chodesh Iyar before counting the Jewish People. By doing so, Hashem demonstrates their exalted position. During the month of Nissan, everyone is on a high spiritual plateau due to their involvement in the Festival of Pesach. Hashem waited until the completion of this month to show that the Jewish People possessed their own personal status.

Nachlas Tzvi cites the Slonimer Rebbe, z.l., who explains Klal Yisrael’s distinctiveness, even when they do not reflect the appropriate Jewish image or act in a manner that is spiritually correct, with the following analogy. It happened once that someone stole a chicken from a private yard. The owner searched everywhere, to no avail; the chicken was nowhere to be found. He decided that he would wait at the slaughterhouse, so that when the thief came to have the chicken slaughtered, he would confront him and retrieve his chicken. He waited for a while until someone approached with a chicken that had some resemblance to his chicken. Its appearance had been severely altered: its feathers had been plucked, and its hair had been cut. The thief apparently wanted to make sure that the owner could not identify his chicken. Immediately, the owner began to scream accusingly, “Thief! It is my chicken. You are a thief. Return my chicken!”

The thief was nobody’s fool and he quickly retorted, “This is not your chicken. It is mine. How could you claim this chicken? Is this the way your chicken looked?” “It is my chicken,” exclaimed the owner. “You did some cutting and some plucking, but it is still mine. Put it down on the floor, and we will see where it will run – to me or to you.”

The yetzer hara, evil inclination, makes a similar accusation concerning Klal Yisrael. He turns to the Malach, Angel, Michael, who as our advocate, seeks to defend us from criticism that is regrettably very condemning. “How can you identify these people?” asks the yetzer hara. “Do they look like Jews? Do they dress like Jews? Do they act like Jews? They look no different than many of the gentiles they cavort with regularly. How can you possibly claim them as yours?”

The Malach is not fazed. He responds, "Yes, you are right. Without Tzitzis they do not look like Jews. Without Torah and mitzvos, they do not act like Jews. You have presented them devoid of their spiritual adornment. Let us put them to a test. Leave them alone for a moment. Halt your blandishments and evil influence, and we will see to whom they will turn!"

We are a holy People. While some of us have become alienated from the way of life for which our ancestors have lived and died, it is only superficial and temporary. Our essence remains holy and true to its source: Hashem.