



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

This Issue Contains:

1. The Count of Israel
2. Yiddle Riddle



David from Bat Yam wrote:

As you know, Israel is taking a census. I remember the census 12 years ago when many Rabbis said not to participate. So we (my family, along with a sizable portion of Israelis) gave back the form without filling it out. This time I've heard there are changes in the way the census is being taken and now it's OK. What's the scoop? (The man who gave us the form said he's coming back next week to pick it up, so a prompt reply would be appreciated.)

Dear David,

It's forbidden to count Jewish people. When they needed to count *Kohanim* in the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple), each one stuck out a finger and then they counted the fingers. Why didn't they just count the people directly? Our Sages explain: "Because it is forbidden to count Israel, as is written 'The number of *Bnei Yisrael* will be like the sand of the sea, which shall not be measured...'"

The concept is a mystical one: The *Ayin HaRah* ('evil eye') holds sway over anything counted. Attaching a number to something limits it, and thereby limits its capacity to receive blessing. The census taken in the time of King David brought catastrophe: "David insisted, 'Go count Israel'...And G-d brought a plague on Israel...70,000 died..."

From the case of the *Kohanim*, however, we see that it's OK to count objects — e.g., fingers — which substitute for people. Moses counted the people through the 'half-shekel' that each one donated; King Saul counted them using lambs. Today, when counting the ten people required for a *minyan*, it is customary to recite the verse, "*Hoshia et amecha...*" (Psalms 28:9) which consists of ten words.

As far as the current census is concerned, Rabbi Shalom Yosef Elyashev, *shlita*, gives the following reasons to permit participation:

- **INDIRECT COUNT**

As mentioned, it is OK to count objects — e.g., fingers — which substitute for people. In the current census, it is not **people** being counted, but rather pen marks on a piece of paper.

- **ESTIMATION**

A large number of families forget, refuse, or simply don't bother responding. The census-takers fill this gap with government records and statistical guesswork (based partly on the number of doors in a given neighborhood!). Therefore, it is not a true count.

- **INCLUSIVE**

The current census makes no inquiry about religion. Rather, it counts Israeli citizens of all backgrounds and nationalities; therefore, it is not considered counting 'The Jewish People' *per se*.

- **MECHANICAL MEANS**

- The actual counting is not done by humans; rather, the census form is scanned into a computer.

Based on *all* the above, Rabbi Elyashev permits participation, but adds that one should supply only the ID numbers but leave out the names. This is in order to emphasize the fact that the count is indirect.

Speaking of counting, two guys are driving down a country road:

Wilfred: Hey Look! There's 295 cows up on that hill!

Vernon: Wow! How in the world did you count them so fast?

Wilfred: Shuks, Vern! I just counted the legs and divided by four!

Sources:

- Tractate *Yoma* 22a.
- Exodus 30:11 and Rashi.
- II Shmuel 24, I Shmuel 15:4.

Yiddle Riddle

Caterers get a vacation during the 'Counting of the Omer' and the days leading up to Tisha B'Av — times when there are no weddings. When do they take an entire month vacation from:

- 1) Bar Mitzvahs (but not Bat Mitzvahs)?
- 2) Bat Mitzvahs (but not Bar Mitzvahs)?
- 3) Bar and Bat Mitzvahs?

If you have E-Mail and a question, you can submit it to Ask The Rabbi for possible inclusion in a future edition. Just write your question using your E-Mail program, set the subject to "Ask The Rabbi" and send it to ohr@jer1.co.il. We can't include all questions submitted, but we do try to respond to everyone.

Ask The Rabbi is written by Rabbi Moshe Lazerus, Rabbi Benzion Bamberger, Rabbi Reuven Subar, Rabbi Avrohom Lefkowitz and other Rabbis at Ohr Somayach Institutions / Tanenbaum College, Jerusalem, Israel.

General Editor: **Rabbi Moshe Newman**

Production Design: **Lev Seltzer**

Ask The Rabbi is available from several sources: • World Wide Web: Our address is <http://www.jer1.co.il/orgs/ohr> • Fax and Mail in Israel and US-MAIL in America. Send us a note requesting a subscription in Israel, or call 800-431-2272 in the US for details. • E-Mail via InterNet. To subscribe, send the message "sub ask {your full name}" to listproc@jer1.co.il

22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

972-2-810-315

972-2-812-890

ohr@jer1.co.il

38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

1-212-213-3100

1-212-213-8717

RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@Gramercy.ios.com

613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

1-905-886-5730

1-905-886-6065

avram.rothman@canrem.com

©1995 Ohr Somayach International - All rights reserved

Dedication opportunities are available for Ask The Rabbi — Please contact us for details

Issue #85 - 2 Decmeber 1995

This publication contains words of Torah. Please treat it with due respect. Do not let this land on a garbage heap.