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? Or 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, “Hoshei 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.

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?