

CHASAM SOFER

BAMIDBAR

1. *One Census, Two Meanings*

שָׂאוּ אֶת ראש כל עדת בני ישראל

Count the heads of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel (1:2)

The term used for “count the heads” is **שָׂאוּ אֶת ראש**, which literally means *raise the head*. This indicates that the census served to *elevate* the Jewish people and ascribe greatness to them. However, the Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:11; cited by *Ramban* to v. 3) notes that **שָׂאוּ אֶת ראש** can also mean, *remove the head*, as in the verse (*Bereishis* 40:19), **ישא פרעה את מעליך ותלה אותך על העץ**, *Pharaoh will remove your head from you and hang you on a tree*. According to this interpretation, our verse alludes to the fact that the men counted in this census were destined to die in the Wilderness, as punishment for the sin of the Spies. *Ramban* asks, however: Since the simple meaning of the phrase **שָׂאוּ אֶת ראש** follows its positive connotation of “*raise the head*,” why does the Midrash interpret it in a negative manner?

We may resolve this by noting that when the Torah excludes the Leviim from the count, it states (1:49): **אך את מטה לוי לא תפקד ואת ראשם לא תשא**, which seems to mean, *But the tribe of Levi you shall not count “and their head you shall not raise.”* Now, if **שָׂאוּ אֶת ראש** denotes “*elevation*,” why would the Torah exclude the Leviim from being counted and gaining this blessing? The Midrash therefore reasons that **שָׂאוּ אֶת ראש** must also carry the negative connotation of “*remove the head*.” Because the Leviim were dedicated to Hashem’s service, Hashem said, **ואת ראשם לא תשא**, which according to the Midrash means, *and their head you shall not remove*. They were excluded from the decree of death that would ultimately be imposed on all those counted in this census (*Toras Moshe HaShalem*, p. 1, **ד”ה שָׂאוּ אֶת ראש כל** (עדת בני ישראל)).

In Memory of
R’ Yakov ben R’ Shmuel Yosef Rieder
and R’ Shimon ben R’ Moshe Lieberman ע”ה

2. Seeing the Good

As mentioned, the phrase **שאו את ראש** can be interpreted “remove the head.” While this interpretation seems negative, it actually contains a positive message as well, and complements the message of elevation and grandeur conveyed by “raise the head.”

What was the reason for the census? The apparent reason was that Moshe and the *Nesiim* needed to determine the number of people in each tribe so that Eretz Yisrael could be divided fairly among the tribes. The time of this census was appropriate for that purpose, because at this point the Jewish people had not yet committed the sin of the Spies, and they were ready to travel to Eretz Yisrael.

However, Hashem knew in advance that the Jews would eventually commit the sin of the Spies and that this generation would therefore die in the Wilderness. Thus, the people counted in this census would not enter Eretz Yisrael and would not divide the Land. Obviously, then, the division of the Land cannot have been Hashem’s reason for commanding Moshe to take the census. What, though was His reason? It is, as *Rashi* explains, that Hashem wanted to count the Jews simply to demonstrate His love for them.

This idea is alluded to in the double meaning of the phrase, **שאו את ראש**. The literal meaning is *raise the head*, but according to the Midrash it means *remove the head*. The latter interpretation is negative only on a superficial level. In truth, though, it contains the basis of the positive interpretation. The expression *remove the head* alludes that Hashem knew that those counted in this census would die in the Wilderness. But if they would not live to divide the Land, why did Hashem want them to be counted? It must be because He loves them. In this sense, the census is an elevation for the Jews and serves to *raise* their head! It is thus the negative meaning that makes us realize the message contained in the positive meaning: Hashem counts the Jews because He loves each and every one of them (*Toras Moshe HaShalem*, p. 1, **ד"ה שאו את ראש א**).

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