**Parshat Bamidbar**

This week’s parsha focuses at great length on counting the people and the tribes in the form of a census. Counting. Something we have been doing as part of the Omer for the last approximately 6 weeks. But what is so special about counting?

Surely Hashem knew how many people there were. So why count? Rashi teaches that Hashem counted the People because they were so dear to Him (Rashi to Bamidbar 1:1). This suggests that the process of counting something reveals the counter’s positive attitude towards it. For instance, when a shepherd counts his sheep, this indicates his sheep are valuable to him. When a child counts their marbles in their collection, they are counting them because they are traded as something of worth to them. The very act of counting reveals that the person counting attributes value to the object being counted.

Yet, it is already clear that Hashem loved Bnei Yisrael. He chose them and gave them His most precious gift, the Torah. Why did He need to count us and let us know that He was counting us so often if we were already dear to Him?

There are at least two possible answers to this question. One answer is that the very process of counting continues to increase our love. Hashem’s love is infinite, but for us mere mortals, our love waxes and wanes. One way we learn to increase our love and appreciation of something is to count it. By immersing ourselves in it and focusing our attention on it, we are enhancing our love for it. If we count our childen, our money, our blessings, that means our minds are naturally involved in the subject matter of our counting, which naturally leads us to connect and feel close to it. This is a good technique we can use to ncrease and fire up our passionate love for something, such as the Torah and the mitzvot.

Another possible reason why Hashem counted us (and we learn to count those that are dear to us) is the positive effect on that being counted (assuming it is not an inanimate object!). The person being counted feels more safe and precious and looked after. In Chovot Halevavot, Gates of Trust, the author teaches that there are 7 attributes unique to Hashem which lead us to calm equanimity. One of them is that He is completely involved in every aspect of our lives. By counting the people in our lives, we are showing them that we are involved in their life, and thus increasing their trust in our love for them.

In his parsha sheet this week, Rabbi Ledder explains how through the prohibition against counting Jewish people as numbers, we learn that each individual has merit and worth and is not merely a faceless ‘number’. However, perhaps another reason why we are prohibited from counting Jewish people is to avoid the mistaken assumption that a person designated a higher number is ‘higher’ or better than his fellow who received a lower number. More is not necessarily better (think Supersized Me). If counting shows how dear something is to us, perhaps we might erroneously conclude that a higher number deserves or should be granted more love. Though we are permitted to count Jews – for instance to determine whether we have enough for a minyan – we are prohibited to assign a number to each Jew. This restriction may serve as a reminder that though we are all unique, we are all equal - in that each of us has an equally valuable spark of Hashem inside, a tzelem Elokim mimal. And that each of us is inherently valuable as part of the klal. We are no MORE special or LESS special than anyone else but are vitally integral to the overall whole.

We are currently counting the Omer. Applying this rationale to the Omer days, we may realise that Day number 1 Day Number 29 and Day Number 40 are all equally valuable, and without each of these numbers we would never reach Matan Torah! Though there is a different kabbalistic middah attached to each day, and they are thus unique in this regard, they are not better or moe important than another day. Without each of these days, we would not be able to complete the countdown (or count-up) towards Shavuot.

Though the counting process is vital to both demonstrate and enhance our love, it is not the quantity per se – how much food, clothing, material wealth, children – but the fact that we have what to count at all. And by counting – even the two shekels in our wallets or the one hair on our head- again and again, we are revealing to ourselves, others and Hashem that we are grateful for what we have.

How can we apply this message to our parenting practice this week?

Sometimes as parents we may experience a natural feeling of frustration or distance from a particular child at a particular stage. If this distance bothers us, and we want to regain our loving connection, one way we can do this is to ‘count’ our child. But isn’t this a little tricky, particularly if we only have one child? In practice, we can count our child’s qualities. That is, to immerse ourselves in them, in their ways, in their strengths. By constantly counting our blessings in relation to that child (wow, Hashem has blessed me with a son/daughter, an oldest/youngest, a 9 year old/2 year old, a thinker/dancer, a child!), we are increasing our loving feelings towards them. And from their perspective, if they know we are counting them as a blessing, they will correspondingly feel safer, cared for and more treasured as a result. Furthermore, even if we own one of something, we can still count it and demonstrate how dear to us it is as a result. Look, I have a child! What a blessing.

Wishing you a Shabbat Shalom, filled with the uplifting joy of knowing we have almost reached the end of the count-up towards receiving the greatest Divine gift, the treasured Torah in which we involve ourselves, with love.

With bracha