

"והיה מספר בני ישראל כחול הים". That is how this week's parsha begins.

are counted. But there is a problem: you're not allowed to count Jews. When the Gemara in Yoma talks about not counting Jews, it quotes this haftarah: והיה מספר בני ישראל כחול הים אשר לא ימד ולא יספר. Klal Yisroel cannot be measured and cannot be counted.

What does it mean "you can't count Jews" – physically? The number of human beings on the planet Earth is a finite number, so you can always count them physically. So what does לא יספר mean? It means you're not allowed to count a Jew. Why aren't you allowed to count a Jew? Because every one of us was created with a unique נשמה.

If I have ten apples, I don't start to look at the difference between each apple, I say I just have ten apples. I am representing all these individual apples by using a number. When I do that, I ignore the individuality of each apple. And if I have apples, pears and oranges, what do I say? I have ten fruits. I only look at the השווה, I don't look at the individuality of each object I am counting.

But we cannot do this for Jews. Every Jew is a unique נשמה. Every one of us was created as a unique נשמה. And every one of us has a unique דרך in avodas Hashem. Counting is something that reduces everyone to a number. We're not a number.

The parsha says in the beginning of parshas Shemos: ואלה שמות בני ישראל אשר יצאו מצרים. And there it says: ואלה שמות בני ישראל אשר יצאו מצרים. He quotes a posuk: המוציא במספר. It is saying Hashem has a unique capacity to see the individuality and see the totality simultaneously.

Sometimes people see the totality, but they don't see the individuality. Some see the individuality, and don't see the totality. We're a unique people. Therefore, there is a unique issur on Klal Yisroel to see the totality without the individuality of their unique tzelem Elokim.

So, בני ישראל counted in a unique way that reflects their individuality and they traveled in a certain way.

They had the דגלים. There is a very strange מדרש about the flags of the שבטים. I think about it often.

The דגלים identified the uniqueness of each שבט. The מדרש says the day that Klal Yisroel got the דגלים was a day like קבלת התורה. And that's one of the reasons we read פרשת במדבר before שבועות. What does that mean? What's the big deal about a דגל?

What's a דגל? It's a flag with some symbol on it. It represented the fact that each שבט has its own unique דרך.

When יעקב was on the way to חרן to get married, the parsha says he put stones around his head and in the morning there was one stone. There are a few different opinions in the מדרש: how many stones? One says twelve. Yaakov knew there was a מסורה among the אבות that if he were to have twelve sons, they would be the twelve שבטים. The one who was going to found כלל ישראל is going to have twelve sons. Each one was going to be unique.

כלל ישראל wasn't the founder of אברהם אבינו. He had eight children, one of them was יצחק. And יצחק אבינו had two children. If in the morning I wake up and these twelve stones become one, then I know I'll have the זכות to found כלל ישראל. What's יעקב אבינו saying?

The אבות were incredible human beings. All the כוחות הנפש that we have in Klal Yisroel today are because we're drawing on the אבות. That's why they're אבות. My כוחות הנפש, כוחות הנפש, everyone's – because I'm drawing from my great, great, great-grandfather all the way back to שלושה נקראו אבות. That's why יצחק אבינו.

If I can embody all the twelve different עבודות, then I can found כלל ישראל, because each one will

take a different part of me.

אוהל מועד around the middle, משכן around the שבטים, and around שבט לוי were the twelve שבטים. Each שבט was equidistant from the center. What does that mean? The Gemara at the end of Taanis says: לעתיד לבוא is going to sit in the center and all the צדיקים will make a circle around Him and say "זה השם קיווינו לו".

Why a circle? Because every צדיק has his own עבודה. And לעתיד לבוא we're going to see that we're all equidistant from the center. Each צדיק, with his own unique עבודה is just as important to Hashem as every other. So ראוהו – he has to be ראוהו! His unique עבודה is important! And שמעון, with his unique עבודה. And יהודה, יהודה, etc.

But – and here's an important "but" – לוי is not equidistant. He is in the middle.

That means ראוהו is the same distance from the אוהל מועד as is שמעון and as יהודה, דן, יששכר, זבולון. Only לוי is in the middle. Why? Because לוי is unique.

"ויראו משפטיך ליעקב ותורתך לישראל".

לוי is totally dedicated to הוא הקדוש ברוך הוא. There's no other agenda in שבט לוי. Total dedication to Hashem.

Now the שבטים are restricted in many ways from functioning like all the other שבטים. They're not allowed to do this, they're not allowed to do that, they don't go out to war – ולא זוכים – בכוח גופם.

Why? Why don't they go out to war? Because they're the השם. They are in the army of הוא הקדוש ברוך הוא.

But there is an interesting dynamic with שבט לוי. The שבטים says famously – ולא שבט לוי בלבד. This is not true with other שבטים. A member of שבט לוי can't move over to שבט אהרן. A member of שבט אהרן can't move over to שבט לוי. Not everyone can come in to be part of another שבט.

But שבט לוי is unique.

And here's a very big confusion people have. Everyone is given the opportunity – Not just Jews! The שבטים says something incredible because he is quoting from the תנא דבי אליהו. It doesn't say כל אחד ואחד. It specifically says כל אחד ואחד מכל באי עולם. Any human being who decides my life is dedicated to תורה הוא על פי תורה, he has that same status as שבט לוי.

But the שבטים has two requirements for that: רוחו והבינו מדעו. You have to understand, and you have to be inspired. You must understand what it means to fulfill the purpose for which הוא put us on this planet and what we're doing in the hundred twenty years He gives us here.

The תכלית of everything: להודות לך, לשמך הגדול באמת, ולתורה באהבה.

What is the purpose of our learning, of our davening, of our מצוות? We begin the תורה אהבה רבה of ברכה, doing, מצוות, ולקרבנו לשמך הגדול באמת – Why? לקרבנו לשמך הגדול וליראה שמך.

First one understands what it means that there's a עולם של רבונות in this world. And Hashem chose one group of people and gave them the opportunity to get close to Him, and they represent Him in this world. If you stop and think deeply what that means, it's overwhelming. And anyone in the world has that opportunity! It's an unbelievable idea.

So everyone can move from the periphery of the circle into the middle of the circle.

I say this every year before שבועות: What's the difference between לוי and יששכר?

It is very simple. We say in תורת הברכה that לוי had one חשבון in this world: Come what may, I'm dedicated to ה' הקדוש ברוך הוא. It's dangerous, it's unpopular, but I don't care. There are no distractions, there was nothing else in his life.

יששכר also learned – יומם ולילה – He is "יששכר חמור גרם רובץ בין", "המחפשים", he's a hardworking person. "וירא מנוחה כי טוב". And הקדוש ברוך הוא gave him a very fertile part of ארץ ישראל. The posuk calls it עול תורה instead of farming. I'm neglecting my fertile land and I'm going to learn תורה. So why is he not שבט לוי?

Because he made a deal with זבולון. Why does that deal between יששכר and זבולון make a difference?

יששכר says to זבולון – you take care of my פרנסה, and I'm going to learn twenty-four hours a day. יששכר has security – he has a guaranteed financial backing.

He doesn't have that guaranteed security, He depends on the generosity of all the נדבות of ישראל. He doesn't have that guaranteed פרנסה from his תרומה and his מעשר, and all the different פרנסה. This is why Levi is further inside the circle. Because he has one חשבון in his mind – הקדוש ברוך הוא.

And everyone can do that if they choose.

There's a popular phrase people say today: "not everyone's cut out for learning." I don't know where this came from. The רמב"ם at the end of הלכות יסודי התורה says this is not true. Anyone – a brilliant person, a not so brilliant person, a broad-minded person, a narrow-minded person, all types of people – are capable of mastering the entire Torah on their level. Each one of us has our חלק in the Torah. "אפשר שידעם הכל", everyone.

תורה is an incredible book. I'm going to have grandchildren for שבת. So I learn about the פרשה and I talk to my grandchildren about the פרשה. There's one book that from the smallest to the biggest we all can learn from, on many different levels – but it's the same book! It's an incredible book called the תורה. So I see certain things in the פרשה, my five-year-old grandson is going to see a different thing in the פרשה.

"אפשר שידעם הכל", everyone can know it. And that's essential. Why? Because it is the key to getting one's עולם הבא. The רמב"ם says it in פרק ט, הלכות תשובה, and פרק ד, הלכות יסודי התורה:

שהם הטובה הגדולה שהשפיע הקדוש ברוך הוא ליישוב העולם הזה כדי לנחול חיי העולם הבא.

What is the דרך to עולם הבא? It's through תורה. So Hashem had to make Torah available to everyone if he so chooses, in order to give him עולם הבא.

The רמב"ם says a very interesting thing in הלכות תשובה. פרק ט, הלכות תשובה. The Rambam observes that the תורה doesn't talk about ועונש ושכר in terms of עולם הבא. It only talks of reward in terms of עולם הזה. For example, ונתתי מטר ארצכם בעתו יורה ומלקוש.

The רמב"ם explains that if a person has only מצוות מצוות without זכות, תורה, his שכר is limited to what he gets in this world. But שכר of the next world is only through מצוות together with תורה.

This is also a גמרא in Sotah. The פסוק says: כי נר מצוה ותורה אור. The גמרא asks: עולם הבא? How is my wife going to get עולם הבא? She has the תורה when she is providing everything, enabling her sons and her husband to be able to learn תורה. That's how women have the זכות of תורה to get עולם הבא. It's a very, very simple equation.

Every day we all say a very interesting בתורתך. Give us our חלק in תורה. My חלק in תורה is not your חלק in תורה. Each Jew is an individual יחיד that has his unique חלק in תורה.

But some people say, I want a more comfortable life. I'm not interested in the maximum עולם הבא at the expense of fully enjoying my עולם הזה.

We are coming to שבועות, and we need to understand what קבלת התורה means.

גירות is קבלת התורה.

What do we tell a גר before he becomes Jewish? If a non-Jew wants to become Jewish, we try to discourage him and talk him out of it. We tell him: while you are a גוי, no one hates you! If you become a Jew, they're all going to hate you. You'll be joining 3,500 years of being hated since אברהם אבינו. You want to put up with that?

You have to put up with a lot to be a Jew. But guess what? Everything in life is weighing a plus against a minus. A male comes to be a גר you say to him, "listen, ישראל wanted to go through the גירות at הר סיני. And it wasn't easy – בדמיך חיי בדמיך חיי. You have to go through ברית מילה, it hurts, it's painful." Just imagine having a bris – a minor operation – in the times before you had all the sterile medical equipment that we have to day. No anesthetic. A גר cutting off his ערלה means a lot of pain, a lot of danger. That's part of being Jewish.

And you have to bring a קרבן, you have to be willing to give up something. As they say in English, "no pain, no gain." But what you get is infinity. Every one of us has our חלק חלק in עולם הבא. And לעתיד לבוא, all the צדיקים are going to stand there and הקדוש ברוך הוא will say you are all equidistant from the center.

One more thing. As we prepare for קבלת התורה, we read פרשת במדבר. On the posuk: ואלה שמות האנשים אליצור בן שדיאור, the מדרש says look carefully, what's in his name? "אליצור בן שדיאור", it is שדי-אור. Very Jewish names. הקדוש ברוך הוא is right there in his name.

Also שלמה-קל, צורי-שדי is "שלומיאל בן צורישידי". You don't find 'George' there. I don't know what the equivalent name of 'George' would be in Egyptian. They were in Egypt for 210 years – but look at those names! They're all very Jewish names. You don't have 'George', you don't have 'Alfred', you don't have anything foreign there.

A name is how you identify yourself. It tells the world who you are. Do you identify yourself as being Jewish? Or identify yourself as being a גוי? If your name is George and the only time you go by חיים is when you are called up to the ספר תורה, that means only then is when you're identified as Jewish. The rest of the time, you're identified as George. That's who you are.

This Jewish identity is what enabled ישראל כלל to survive golus in Egypt. They had an identity. They stayed with their identity. They didn't change לשונם ושמם. A name is how you tell people who you are. And if you tell people, "I'm George, my father's name is Frank". It is very different than telling people "I'm חיים בן יוסף". It's a very big difference in identifying to others who you are.

Then there is another element that helped Klal Yisroel survive golus: ויתילדו על משפחותם. What does that mean? ויתילדו על משפחותם?

The מדרש says people were skeptical of the claim made by the Torah that the Jewish spouses were faithful to each other. They said, wait a minute, they were under Egyptian control! Can you really believe that no Jewish woman was מזונה with any Egyptian man? The answer is, NO. Because Klal Yisroel knew that what separates us from the גויים more than anything else is עריות. There was only one case in 210 years, one case in the 83 years of severe עבדות where there was a Jewish woman who was מזונה with an Egyptian.

That purity of ישראל כלל was maintained in the midst of a fundamentally corrupt culture. It is a fact that Hashem Himself attested to. How do you maintain yourself? You maintain yourself very simply – by knowing exactly who you are. I am a representative of הקדוש ברוך הוא in this world. That's who I am.

ושמך הגדול והקדוש עלינו קראת.

That awareness of who you are has to go to the root of your essence. I'm not a lawyer, I'm not a doctor, I'm not a stockbroker, I'm not a businessman, I'm not a tycoon, I'm nothing other than a Jew. I do certain things on the side to make a living – it's not who I am.

That's what maintained ישראל כלל. And this is what's involved in קבלת התורה.