



# Likkutei Sichos

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## Counting Sheep

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## 1.

### WHY DOES RASHI CONNECT THE CENSUS TO THE PLAGUE

In his commentary on the phrase,<sup>1</sup> “It was after the plague,” Rashi concludes, “**etc.**,” alluding to that which immediately follows — Hashem’s command to count the Jewish people: “Hashem said to Moshe... take a census of the entire assembly of the children of Israel....” Subsequently, Rashi comments:

This is analogous to a shepherd, into whose flock wolves entered and killed some of them {his sheep}; he counts them to know the number remaining.

Understood simply (as in fact the commentators<sup>2</sup> on Rashi do), Rashi’s intent is to address the following: The verse emphasizes that “It was after **the plague...**” This wording indicates that Torah wishes to convey not only that the census occurred **after** the previous event (the plague), but rather that the census occurred **in connection** with the plague. This begs the question: What is the connection between the plague and the counting of the Jewish people? Rashi explains by drawing an analogy to a shepherd: “He counts them to know the number remaining.”

However, this interpretation is difficult, for a student of Scripture is, from the outset, familiar with this concept (of a census). **Rashi** has already explained (at the beginning of *parshas Bamidbar*),<sup>3</sup> “Because of their dearness to Him, He counts them **at all times**.” “At all times” includes any time that a {significant} change occurred to the Jewish nation’s situation. As Rashi continues there, “When they departed from Egypt... when they fell at the {sin of the Golden} Calf... when he came to rest his Divine presence....” Thus, the student already assumes likewise in our context, i.e., Hashem commanded Moshe to count the Jews following the plague “because of their dearness to Him” (just as, “when they fell at the {sin of the Golden} Calf, He counted them to determine the number of those remaining”).

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<sup>1</sup> *Bamidbar* 26:1. {The verse continues to detail Hashem’s command to Moshe and Elazar the *kohen* to count the Jewish people.}

<sup>2</sup> *Devek Tov* and *Sifsei Chachomim*, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Bamidbar* 1:1.

Even were we to posit that Rashi does not rely on a student remembering what he learned in *parshas Bamidbar*, Rashi could have sufficed by (reminding the student by) writing succinctly, “to determine the number remaining.”

## 2.

### QUESTIONS ON RASHI'S ANALOGY

Additionally, we need to clarify:

- a) How does Rashi's analogy help us understand the analogue? Seemingly, the analogue is, by itself (without the “analogy of shepherd, etc.”), clear and simple enough. *Moshe Rabbeinu*, the Jewish nation's shepherd, who had self-sacrifice for his flock, counted the Jewish people in order to know “the number of those who remained” whom he had to shepherd.
- b) In the analogy of a **shepherd**, in which the shepherd “counts them to know the number remaining,” it is the shepherd who wants to know “the number remaining.” Seemingly, this does not correspond to the analogue, in which Hashem, the **owner** of the sheep, commands a census of the Jewish people to be taken. (Not that Moshe himself, their shepherd, wanted to know their number.)

With difficulty we could answer that the intention in the analogue is as follows: Hashem told Moshe to do something that mattered to him (**Moshe**), just as in the analogy it mattered to the shepherd. However, a question remains: Why didn't Rashi just bring an analogy (not of a shepherd, but rather) of a sheep-owner?

- c) Furthermore, *Tanchuma*<sup>4</sup> (and *Bamidbar Rabbah*)<sup>5</sup> do not draw an analogy to a shepherd, but rather an analogy to “a wolf that preyed upon the sheep. The sheep-**owner** must count them....”<sup>6</sup> Rashi **deviates** from this wording, and writes, “This is analogous to a **shepherd**.”
- d) This question is even more baffling: Rashi **himself**, in *parshas Ki Sisa*<sup>7</sup> (in the context of counting the Jewish people, “after the incident of the Golden Calf, because a plague entered among them”) quotes:

An analogy of a flock of sheep precious to its **owner** that had been stricken by pestilence. Once the pestilence ended, the owner said to the shepherd, “Please count my sheep and ascertain how many of them are left {to let it be known that the flock was precious to him}.”

Why, then, does Rashi say here, “This is analogous to a **shepherd**...”?

- e) Some further disparities: a) In *parshas Ki Sisa*, Rashi says, “An analogy... stricken by **pestilence**,” whereas here he says, “into whose flock **wolves** entered.”<sup>8</sup> b) In *parshas Ki Sisa*, Rashi emphasizes Hashem’s affection for the Jewish people in the analogy (“to make it known that the flock is precious to him”). In contrast, here in the analogy of the shepherd, this concept does not appear. c) The wording in the *Midrashim* says, “upon the sheep,” or, “among the sheep,” but Rashi **deviates** from this wording and writes, “into the flock.”

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<sup>4</sup> On our *parshah*, sec. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ch. 21, par. 7.

<sup>6</sup> The version in *Bamidbar Rabbah* reads: “A wolf entered among the sheep. The sheep owner descended....”

<sup>7</sup> *Shemos* 30:16. See also *Tanchuma*, *parshas Ki Sisa*, sec. 9, and *Pesikta De’Rav Kahana (Baber) parshas Shekalim*.

<sup>8</sup> The reason why Rashi writes, “wolves” (in plural) in contrast to the *Tanchuma* and *Bamidbar Rabbah* (which write, “wolf”) is as follows: The plague came as punishment for two sins: the illicit behaviour of the Jewish people with the daughters of Moav, and the Jewish people’s attachment to *Baal Peor*.

### 3.

WHY THE SECOND INTERPRETATION?

Then Rashi continues:

Another interpretation: When they left Egypt and were given over to Moshe, they were given over to him by number.<sup>9</sup> Now that he was approaching death and the need to return his flock, he gave them back by number.

We can appreciate why Rashi presents this interpretation as “another interpretation,” and not as the first and primary interpretation, for this interpretation does not explain the connection between “count...” and “it was after the plague.” However, we must clarify an opposite issue: What was difficult in the first interpretation that required Rashi to bring a second interpretation without this difficulty?

### 4.

WHY NOT COUNT THE REMAINDERS FROM THE CIVIL WAR

The explanation:

Rashi here seeks to clarify not (only) the connection between “count...,” and “it was after the plague,” for, as mentioned, we already know this from Rashi’s commentary on *parshas Ki Sisa* and *parshas Bamidbar*. Rather Rashi seeks to solve a difficulty with the words, “it was after the plague...” themselves.

At the end of *parshas Balak*, the Torah recounts how the<sup>10</sup> “men who were attached to *Baal Peor*” were punished in two ways: a) “The wrath of Hashem flared up against Israel,”<sup>11</sup> “He sent a plague upon them.”<sup>12</sup> Subsequently,<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> {I.e., he was given the exact number of those of whom he was put in charge.}

<sup>10</sup> *Bamidbar* 25:5.

<sup>11</sup> *Bamidbar* 25:3.

<sup>12</sup> Rashi, *Bamidbar* 25:3.

<sup>13</sup> *Bamidbar* 25:9.

“Those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand.” b) “Moshe said to the judges of Israel, ‘let each man kill his men.’” As Rashi explains, “Each and every one of the judges of Israel would kill two, and the judges of Israel were eight myriads and eight thousand {eighty-eight thousand}, as stated in *Sanhedrin*.” Thus, according to this calculation, it emerges that (the judges of Israel) killed more than one hundred and seventy thousand.

Consequently, we find something very baffling in our verse. Why does the verse emphasize “after the **plague**,” i.e., that the Jewish people were counted in order to determine how many remained alive after the plague? According to the numbers mentioned earlier, it would have been important to know the “number remaining” after the command to “let each man kill his men” was carried out, when the number of dead was more than **seven** times the number of “those who died in the plague”!

To address this difficulty Rashi draws an analogy to “a **shepherd**, into whose flock **wolves** entered,” as we will explain.

## 5.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE AND WHY DO THEY CARE

Simply put, the difference between a sheep-owner who instructs a shepherd to count the sheep “to know the number remaining” and a shepherd who counts them on his own accord (for this purpose) is:

The sheep-owner instructs that the sheep be counted in order to know “the number remaining” because the sheep are **dear** to him, and he wants to show this. (As Rashi writes in *parshas Ki Sisa*, “Count my sheep... in order to **make known** that they are dear to Him.”) Meaning, what matters is whether the (counted) sheep have remained intact; it does not matter whether or not the shepherd was at fault for the misfortune causing the sheep to perish. Of primary importance is the integrity of the remaining sheep.

In contrast, when a shepherd counts his sheep “to know the number remaining,” he does so primarily (not to display how dear the remaining sheep are to him, but rather) because of his job as a shepherd. His intention is to better **devote** himself to the remaining sheep and to protect them from a similar misfortune occurring again.

Thus, presumably, this would primarily occur when a **shepherd** feels responsible for the loss of sheep in the flock. However, if the shepherd could not have prevented the mishap, then he feels no urge to (count the sheep and to) ascertain the number remaining, since he has done nothing wrong in **his** job as **shepherd**.

Now we can appreciate the discrepancies. In the analogy of the sheep-owner (in *parshas Ki Sisa*) Rashi writes, “stricken by **pestilence**,” but here in the analogy of a shepherd, Rashi writes, “wolves entered.”

A shepherd cannot protect his sheep from pestilence, and therefore he is blameless if this happens. However, he can, and in fact, it is his job, to protect the sheep from wolves (using a stick, or something similar). So if “wolves entered... and killed some of them,” the shepherd is responsible.

Therefore, in the context of the analogy of the sheep-**owner**, where the dearness of the sheep to him is unrelated to how the sheep were afflicted, as mentioned, Rashi writes, “stricken by pestilence.” (In fact, the situation in *parshas Ki Sisa* was (more) similar to pestilence, as we will explain in section 6.) In contrast, in the analogy of the **shepherd**, Rashi writes, “**wolves** entered...,” for in this situation the shepherd’s performance of his job is relevant.

## 6.

### MOSHE THOUGHT HE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PLAGUE

On this basis, we can appreciate the solution to the aforementioned enigmatic words, “and it was after the plague,” using the analogy of the shepherd:

The loss of Jewish lives, Heaven forbid, caused by the judges of Israel killing their men was a result of the Jewish court judging and sentencing them to death. Therefore, Moshe would not have felt responsible for their demise, for which reason he would have counted the remainder.

Not so regarding the plague whose prevention was linked to Moshe. As **Rashi** writes in the end of *parshas Balak*,<sup>14</sup> “The tribe of Shimon gathered... he said to Moshe, ‘Is this woman forbidden?’... the law was hidden from Moshe...” Only afterward, when Pinchas saw the incident, recalled the law, and killed Zimri, was “the plague was halted.” Although the fact that “the law was hidden from Moshe” was orchestrated from On High so that (as Rashi<sup>15</sup> writes) “Pinchas would come and take that which was fit for him,” only Heaven knew that Moshe was not responsible. But **Moshe** himself could have thought that his forgetfulness had delayed the plague from being halted in the meantime.

Rashi, in fact, tells us this by explaining about the census following the **plague**, when he relates “This is analogous to a **shepherd** into whose flock **wolves** entered..., he counts them to know the number remaining.” The census was: a) initiated by **Moshe** (the shepherd) on his own accord; and b) “to know the number remaining” from the **plague**, which Moshe (thought he) could have prevented, similar to, “into whose flock **wolves** (entered)””; or at least he could reduced the severity of the plague, thereby enabling more people to remain alive.

In contrast to the narrative of the Golden Calf (in *parshas Ki Sisa*), at the time of the sin, Moshe found himself upon the mountain. Consequently, he could

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<sup>14</sup> *Bamidbar* 25:6,7,8 with Rashi.

<sup>15</sup> Rashi, *Bamidbar* 25:6.



not have had an impact on the punishment of the sinners. There, Moshe (on his own, as their **shepherd**) had no reason to count his sheep.

Therefore, in that case, Rashi brings: a) an analogy to a flock of “sheep precious to its **owner**,” i.e., Hashem, the sheep-owner, initiated the census. (It was not initiated by the shepherd, because) b) the events were similar to “sheep stricken by **pestilence**,” where the shepherd is not to blame. Therefore, Hashem’s instruction for them to be counted sprung from the sheep-**owner’s** affection for his sheep, as discussed above at length.

## 7.

WHY NOT INVOLVE YEHOShUA

This explanation, however, is not altogether smooth.

At that time, the Jewish people were stationed “in the plains of Moav, opposite the Jordan, near Yericho,”<sup>16</sup> ready to enter Israel. Additionally, Hashem had already decreed: “You will not bring this congregation to the land that I have given them.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the time had come for {Hashem to declare:} “you (Moshe) shall be gathered to your people.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, immediately following the census of the Jewish people (and the narrative of the daughters of Tzelafchad which happened following the census). The verse states, “Go up to the mountain of Avarim....”<sup>19</sup> And subsequently, Hashem instructs Moshe to lean his hands upon Yehoshua.<sup>20</sup>

Since, as mentioned, a **shepherd** takes a tally of his sheep to know how to manage the sheep in the **future** — i.e., to devote himself to protect them better so that no misfortune occurs to them. Thus, **Yehoshua** (like Elazar) should

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<sup>16</sup> *Bamidbar* 22:1.

<sup>17</sup> *Bamidbar* 20:12.

<sup>18</sup> *Bamidbar* 27:13. {A euphemism for passing.}

<sup>19</sup> *Bamidbar* 27:12. {Where Hashem showed Moshe the land of Israel, so that, at least, he could see it before passing.}

<sup>20</sup> *Bamidbar* 27:18. {Thereby appointing him as the leader of the Jewish people after Moshe’s passing.}

have played a role in this census, for he would very **soon** become the shepherd of the Jewish people.

A strained solution: Since Hashem knew that a few months would still pass before Moshe's passing, the census was relevant to Moshe, at least for the coming few months when **he** would still be the shepherd.

However, the reason to not **involve** Yehoshua — who in but a few months time would become the shepherd, leading the Jewish people in an entirely new environment, different to that in which the Jewish people had been for forty **years** — is not smooth; therefore, Rashi offers a second interpretation. The census was connected with Moshe's passing, "Now that he was approaching death and the need to return his flock, he gave them back by number."

[However, the second interpretation is even more challenging than the first. According to the second interpretation, the census was not connected to being "**after the plague**," but rather to "**approaching death**." Therefore, Rashi only brings this interpretation as the second one, and the first interpretation serves as the primary one, from the perspective of *pshuto shel mikra*, as mentioned above in section 3.]

## 8.

HE WHO MARRIES A NON-JEW DOES NOT BELONG IN THE COUNT

We still need to clarify:

Why, in fact, was the census done on the shepherd's — Moshe's — volition, and not on the volition of the sheep-**owner** — Hashem? Hashem could have done so with the intent "to know the number remaining, in order to **show the dearness....**" (Had this been the case, the numbers both of those remaining after the plague and of those remaining after the instruction, "let each man kill his men," would have been relevant. As mentioned above, the sheep owner does not care (in the context of counting) how the sheep were lost.)

The explanation is as follows:

At that time, the Jewish people transgressed the sin of having relations with a gentile woman. The law in this case is, as **Rashi has already mentioned**,<sup>21</sup> “zealots may kill him” (without first hearing the testimony and going to court, etc.). Therefore, the novice student of Scripture already understands the tremendous weight of this sin, to the extent that it brought to the death of close to two hundred thousand Jews. As Rashi writes,<sup>22</sup> “The G-d of these people {the Jewish people} **hates** promiscuity.” Thus, there cannot possibly be room for the matter of (and census motivated by) **dearness**.

This idea will become more satisfying when considered from the perspective of *halachah*:

The sin of having relations with a gentile woman is a sin which (in the words of *Rambam*)<sup>23</sup> “leads to a detriment that has no parallel among all the other forbidden relations. For a child conceived from any other forbidden union is considered the father's son with regard to all matters and is considered a member of the Jewish people.... A son conceived by a gentile woman, by contrast, is not considered his son....” As the Rogatchover Gaon<sup>24</sup> explains,<sup>25</sup> through this sin, “he removes souls from the nation of Israel, for the offspring follows the mother.”

Meaning as follows: If a person transgresses any other sin, no matter which, he does not breach the boundaries that Hashem created between Jews and non-Jews; for even after sinning, he remains a Jew. However, when a person engages in relations with a non-Jew, the child, who should have been from among “the souls of the nation of Israel,” instead is sent “to follow the mother,” and he becomes a non-Jew. Thus, measure for measure, Hashem considers the

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<sup>21</sup> *Bamidbar* 25:7.

<sup>22</sup> *Bamidbar* 24:14.

<sup>23</sup> *Hilchos Issurei Biah*, ch. 12, par. 7.

<sup>24</sup> {Rabbi Yosef Rosen, (1858-1936) also known as “Rogatchover Gaon,” being a *Gaon*, Talmudic genius, and of the city of Rogatchev. Also known as, *Tzofnas Paneach*, the title of his foremost work.}

<sup>25</sup> In his commentary on Torah, *parshas Pinchas*, pg. 262.

sinner (in regards to Hashem's affection for the Jewish nation) as an outsider compared with his flock of sheep.

As *Rambam* continues:<sup>26</sup> “This matter causes one to cling to the gentile nations from whom the Holy One, blessed be He, has separated us....”

Thus, it is not feasible to know “the number remaining,” since those who did not sin are not regarded as the “remainder” of those who did. Rather, Hashem considers it as if there is no relationship (in respect to the affection) between them.

## 9.

### THE DIRECTIVE

Thus, two seemingly antithetical lessons emerge:

On the one hand, we see the far-reaching negative impact of the sin of having relations with a gentile. This is detrimental not only because “the **offspring** follows the {religion of his} mother,” but even moreso, because the sinner himself is barred from Hashem's flock.

[This is also a lesson for those people who have the great merit and responsibility of being in a position in which they can prevent even a single person, even once, from G-d forbid falling prey to this sin. This includes even those who have already fallen, Heaven forbid, into this sin.]

On the other hand, we see that Moshe Rabbeinu — the faithful shepherd of the Jewish nation, who had self-sacrifice for every Jew — devoted himself to care for the needs of, and provide “protection from wolves” for, even these Jews. This was true to the extent that they, too, are counted as part of **his flock**. And so he counts them, “to know the number remaining,” since they, too, are part of **his**

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<sup>26</sup> Op. cit., par. 9.

**flock**, and not just a part at “the edge of the camp,”<sup>27</sup> but rather, “**amongst** the flock.”

Moshe’s {loving} behavior {with errant Jews} becomes (part of) **Torah** and a lesson for every Jew to whom we say:<sup>28</sup> “Remember the Torah of Moshe, My servant.”

-Based on talks delivered on Shabbos *parshas Pinchas*, 5734 (1974)

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<sup>27</sup> *Bamidbar* 11:1, Rashi ad. loc.

<sup>28</sup> *Malachi* 3:22.