

Coming to their Census

Excerpted and adapted from a shiur by Dayan Yitzhak Grossman
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https://baishavaad.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/SHE82_009_Ki_Sisa_Counting_Heads-Censuses_in_Halacha.mp3

When you count B'nei Yisrael according to their numbers, let each man give to Hashem an atonement for his soul when they are counted; then there will be no plague among them when they are counted.

Shmos 30:12

This *pasuk* implies that counting B'nei Yisrael should be done indirectly, using coins. Indeed, the Gemara in Yoma says that one may not count Jews directly (though the *psukim* it cites are from Sefer Shmuel). The Gemara in Brachos says that Dovid Hamelech was guilty of this sin, and it caused a terrible epidemic. This *issur*, though not codified in the Shulchan Aruch, is discussed by some *Rishonim*, who disagree about its parameters.

Recent *poskim* have debated whether the Israeli census violates the prohibition on counting Jews. According to the Steipler Gaon, it is entirely forbidden. The Sheivet Halevi held that the census may be a problem based on a responsum of the Chasam Sofer.[2]

R' Ovadia Yosef, R' Shaul Yisraeli, and R' Eliezer Waldenberg were lenient for a number of reasons, including:

- The Ralbag, followed by later *poskim*, holds that the *issur* does not apply to counting in writing.
- The Re'eim and the Chida maintain that only counting the entire nation is forbidden, and not all the world's Jews are counted by the Israeli census.
- The Kli Yakar writes that the prohibition does not apply where the approximate total is already known.
- R' Asher Weiss (Minchas Asher, Ki Sisa) argues that counting takes place in schools, shuls, and elsewhere, so it is not logical to forbid a census but allow other cases of counting.

[1] It is also mentioned by the Rambam (in *Hilchos Temidin Umusafin* in the context of the *Bais Hamikdash*), and also by the Magein Avraham (O.C. 156).

[2] In a later *teshuvah*, Rav Vosner seems to acknowledge the potential for leniency based on the fact that non-Jews are included in the census.