



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Shemot

Parshat Ki Tisa • Shabbat Parah

Adar 5781 / March 2021



SAVE THE DATE: Sunday • March 14 • Lunchtime Learning
Rabbi Ari Kahn will introduce Sefer Vayikra



How to Avoid an *Eyin Hara* in One Easy Step

By Richard Bienenfeld

Our *Parsha* opens with instructions to use silver coins, a half-shekel in weight, to assist in the census of adult male Israelites. Based on this instruction, it has become a major cultural tradition among Jewish communities to avoid direct counting of heads when performing a census. This is understandable since the command to *Moshe* by *Hashem* cited at the beginning of our *Parsha* is specific:

“When you take a census of the Children of Israel according to their numbers, every man shall give Hashem an atonement for his soul when counting them, so that there will not be a plague among them when counting them.” (Shemot 30:12)

It seems the direct counting of heads is dangerous and can invite a plague. We limit counting and boasting of good fortune due to fear of an “*eyin hara*.” Call it a Jewish superstition.

Rabbeinu Bachye, the 13th-century sage, explains this custom based on the fundamentals of Jewish faith. His *parsha* commentaries all begin with a passage from the Book of Psalms where King Solomon’s words are usually poetic and cryptic and beg for explanation. Here’s the passage Rabbeinu Bachye chose to begin his discussion of *Parsha Ki Tisa*: “Fear of *Hashem* increases days; the years of the wicked will be shortened.” (*Mishle* 10)

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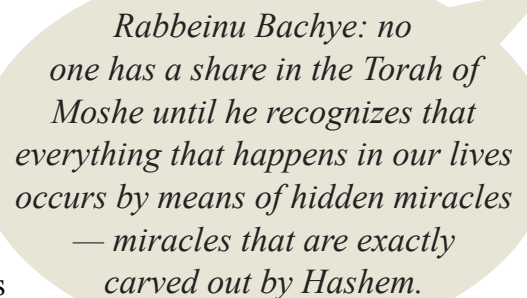
The passage suggests that the righteous enjoy lengthened life, while the life span of the wicked is reduced. Yet, *Hashem* works in a hidden manner. We do not know the destined life span for any individual (which we believe is decreed at birth), so we have no way of knowing, at the end of that life, if it was increased or shortened by divine decree. King Solomon and Rabbeinu Bachye are calling on us to believe that justice, meted out by *Hashem* in a hidden and miraculous process, is perfect.

Rabbeinu Bachye posits that all that we witness in this world is part of the system of “hidden miracles” of the type performed for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when they were protected from harm, granted

wealth, and long and fruitful lives. In contrast, the miracles performed for the Israelites during the Exodus — the Ten Plagues, manna from heaven, drawing water from a rock — were “open miracles.” Since open miracles are rare and limited to particular points in history, Rabbeinu Bachye is encouraging us to recognize the hidden miracles which are performed in great numbers for us every day.

Rabbeinu Bachye boldly reiterates a statement made by his teacher’s teacher, the Ramban: no one has a share in the Torah of *Moshe* until he recognizes that everything that happens in our lives occurs by means of hidden miracles — miracles that are exactly carved out by *Hashem* to shape and define our individual existence! We avoid counting, boasting about, or measuring our blessings because once they are quantified, they can no longer be manipulated by *Hashem* for our needs without an open miracle. Few of us merit such intervention.

And by not counting, we avoid any negative incitement by a Heavenly Accuser, whose mission would be to claim that we are not deserving and that some of our blessings should be retracted. When the blessings are hidden — when we keep them under the radar — *Hashem* can extend his Mercy to us and grant blessings which we may not technically deserve by standards of strict justice. An *eyin hara* only gains power through quantitative evidence.



Rabbeinu Bachye: no one has a share in the Torah of Moshe until he recognizes that everything that happens in our lives occurs by means of hidden miracles — miracles that are exactly carved out by Hashem.

That is why the Torah commands us to perform our census obliquely, using a “*kofer nefesh*,” the “soul’s exchange,” the half-shekel coin. And that is how to avoid an *It* is no coincidence that in preparation for the Purim, the holiday of hidden miracles, we cite the reading of this portion twice within several weeks, once as *Parshat Shekalim* and again as part of the *Parshat Ki Tisa*.

And that, my friends, is how to avoid an *eyin hara*.

Richard and Vicki have been members of the Young Israel of Scarsdale since 1980. Their children, Dana and Marc Jason, and their family, are also active members of our shul. The rest of the family, an unspecified number of children and grandchildren, are living in Israel. Vicki’s brother Kenny and his wife Judy are also YIS members.

*Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?
Please contact Steve Smith at LivingTorahFund@gmail.com*



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