

PARASHAS KI SISA

Strength in Numbers

When the census-taker made his rounds in ancient Israel, he didn't bring a calculator or an abacus on which to record the number of persons in each household, nor did he distribute questionnaires for the people to fill out and return. Instead, he collected a half-shekel from every Jew in the land, and by counting the coins in his bag, he arrived at the new population figure.

In this week's Torah portion, we are told that this indirect method of census-taking was employed because an actual head count might cause harm to the people. But this leads us to ask: How could harm arise from Hashem's expression of endearment by counting His people? What difference could there possibly be between counting people directly or indirectly?

Furthermore, if a collection of coins was required to determine the population figures, why did the Torah specify the half-shekel in particular?

Let us consider for a moment. Contemporary Western society places great emphasis on the overriding importance of the individual. Collective society is only there to accommodate all its individuals, to safeguard their individual rights and privileges. The responsibilities of the individual to society are largely ignored. According to the contemporary Western value system, the individual may not encroach on his brother's space, but he is not his brother's keeper either. The result is a society that endeavors to protect the life and liberty of each individual but encourages him to live in egocentric spiritual isolation.

The Torah concept of the individual, on the other hand, is tempered with a strong sense of community. Our Sages consider each individual person a world unto himself, of such transcendent importance that the entire universe could have been created for his sake alone. And yet, the individual is not an island apart. He is part of the broader community, to which he bears significant responsibilities and from which he draws significant strength.

An individual, no matter how brilliant and talented, is limited in his scope, but the power and potential of a unified community are virtually limitless. In this case, the whole is undoubtedly greater than the sum of its parts. The individual who connects with the community assumes an additional, higher identity as part of this greater whole.

Had the census process taken the form of a head count it would have set each individual squarely on the stage by himself - if only for a brief moment - and drawn Heavenly attention to his flaws and virtues. Very few individuals are worthy and virtuous enough to withstand such scrutiny and come away unharmed..

When the census taker counted the coins he had collected, however, there was no longer an identifiable connection between the coins and the people they represented. In effect, then, the collective population was determined without ever highlighting the individual - with all his faults and shortcomings. The half-shekel underscores this symbolism. Each of us is only a "half," and we only become a "whole" by connecting with the broader community.

A rich, populous country amassed a fearsome mercenary army and invaded one of its small, impoverished neighbors. The king of the small country rallied his people, but the aggressors enjoyed such an overwhelming military advantage that resistance seemed hopeless. All international observers predicted defeat. But to the amazement of all, the defenders snatched victory from the jaws of defeat and expelled the invaders.

"It is really quite simple," said the king at the victory celebration. "I drew my soldiers from the same district and similar backgrounds. They knew and cared for each other, and each knew what was on the other's mind almost before he said it. That army of ferocious mercenaries was an assembly of individuals, but we were a group - unified as one man with one goal in our hearts. It was no contest."

In our own lives, we sometimes feel a sense of aimlessness and loss of direction, a sense of isolation. Very often, these feelings are signs of a loosening of our attachment to the community. No matter how talented and successful we may be as individuals, we can only achieve our full potential by connecting with the overall community, by sharing its pain and its joy. Only in this way can we also draw on the collective strength and merit and bring true peace of mind and fulfillment into our individual lives.