

When you take the count of Bnei Yisrael to their numbers, each man shall give an atonement pledge...so that there should not be a plague when you count them. (30:12)

Jews are counted when necessary, but with great sensitivity and trepidation. *Rashi* explains that when counting Jews, we refrain from taking a head count; rather, each person gives a *machatzis*, half-*shekel*, [to represent] themselves. These half-*shekels* are counted in their stead. In this manner, we avoid the chance of *ayin hora*, evil eye, which, when cast upon a person (even inadvertently), can catalyze a plague. (We take *ayin hora* very seriously!) *Rabbeinu Bachya* writes that when we count people individually, we single them out; likewise, Hashem examines their deeds individually. We are in a better position as part of the larger aggregate of Jews.

According to *Rashi*, counting Jews directly is a recipe for creating a plague. *Rabbeinu Bachya* seems to explain that when people are singled out, they lose the general Divine protection afforded to the *Klal*, communal group, the nation as a whole. The *Malbim* supplements this, saying that, when we count *shekalim*, rather than people, we place our primary focus on the sum total, instead of on the individual *shekel*/ coin.

Apparently, the manner in which we are to execute a Jewish census provides us with a mixed message/lesson: It is not healthy/safe to stand out as individuals. It is much better to blend into the community, be a part of the whole nation. This goes against everything that we teach our children: Be yourself; be an individual; do your thing; be a leader, not a follower, etc. Did Hashem not grant us our individual talents and personality for a reason: To be ourselves? Should we simply blend in with the masses, surrender to the group without allowing for individual expression?

Horav Tzvi Kushelefsky, Shlita, teaches that we should most definitely acknowledge our talents, assert and employ them for the greater good of the community/others, who can benefit from us. Thus, we use our individuality for the greater good – the nation. In this context, we translate the word, *sissa* (as in, *ki sissa*), as “to lift up,” in both a positive and a negative sense. The message would then be: When we attempt to elevate/lift ourselves up for personal, individual aggrandizement, we fail. Life is not about “us.” If, however, we lift ourselves up for the purpose of helping the community, we truly rise.

Life presents us with this challenge on a regular basis. The dilemma of focusing on our personal growth, as opposed to working for the benefit of others, presents a challenge. Some people really cannot do both: “It is either ‘me’ or ‘them.’ I cannot do both.” Such a person has much more with which to contend than this decision. He is so engrossed in himself that he probably cannot be of much help to the community. The *Rosh Yeshivah* posits that those who assist others, thereby utilizing their resources and talents for the greater good, will be sufficiently blessed, such that they themselves will experience unprecedented growth. When Moshe *Rabbeinu* (as *Klal Yisrael’s* advocate) came forward to plead the nation’s case, he said, “And now, if You would but bear their

sin – but if not, erase me now from Your Book that You have written” (*Shemos* 32:32). As a result, he was rewarded with the nation being called, “the nation of Moshe” (*Midrash Tanchuma, Beshalach* 10). One does not lose out by devoting his talents to the benefit of the community.

Mordechai was the fifth (from the top) in fame on the *Sanhedrin* (*Talmud Megillah* 16b). Yet, the *Talmud Chullin* 139b implies that Mordechai was the most distinguished member of the *Sanhedrin*. The contradiction can be resolved, explains *Rav* Kuschelovsky, by asserting that, indeed, in personal erudition he was fifth, but, from a national perspective, he was the elite, the top. Mordechai devoted all of himself, all of his G-d-given talents and qualities, to benefit his people. This dedication catapulted him to the top. Action defines greatness. Mordechai was great, but, by accepting the challenge of dedicating himself to *Klal Yisrael*, he became greater. He dared – he grew!

This, concludes the *Rosh Yeshivah*, is the lesson of the *machatzis ha'shekel*, which was required of every adult male, regardless of position, i.e. social and financial strata. This money was used for the *korbanos tzibbur*, communal sacrifices. The Torah issues a prohibition against giving less than a half-*shekel*, as well as a prohibition against giving more. This begs elucidation. More is good!

I have yet to be called by an organization that does not “ask” me to increase my annual pledge. Yet, the Torah demands “half” – no more – no less – from everyone, period. *Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl* (*Daas Chochmah U'Mussar* 1:19), explains that even the avaricious man for whom parting with a penny is a life-threatening experience, would be likely to contribute a large sum of money if he would receive an honorarium, prestige, his name on the wall. When everyone is limited to a half-*shekel*, he no longer has an opportunity to highlight his individual achievement or pride. We are all the same (which for some is a life-altering experience). This limitation is all about joint, communal effort.