

## **Ki Tissa 5779**

### **When Moses Got It Wrong**

At the very beginning of a service we sometimes see a strange custom. As the service begins and people try to ascertain whether there is a minyan in the room - the quorum of ten Jewish adults that we need for saying the Kaddish and other prayers - an act of not-counting seems to be taking place. Rather than just enumerating people on their fingers, we see people counting with a little nod of the head, or a movement of the eyes, or even by enunciating the words 'not-one, not-two, not-three, not-four.' And you might even see someone quoting an apparently random verse from Psalms - *hoshia et amekha u'varekh et nahlatekha u'r'em venas'em ad ha-olam!*

The reason for all of this is to be found at the very beginning of this week's Torah portion, a part that often goes unexamined because of the rich content later on - the building of the Golden Calf, Moses' reaction, the second set of tablets and the moment in which God passes close to Moses. By contrast, the opening verses feel very mundane:

*The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:*

*When you take a census of the Israelite people according to their enrollment each shall pay the Lord a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague come upon them through their being enrolled.*

*This is what everyone entered in the records shall pay: a half-shekel by the sanctuary weight - twenty gerahs to the shekel...*

*Everyone who is entered in the records, from twenty years up, shall give the Lord's offering: the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less...*

*You shall take the expiation money and apply it to the Tent of Meeting.*

The commentators explain that this 'census tax' served as a way of counting the people - or at least, those men over 20 since it is clear from elsewhere that only men were eligible. Instead of counting the people themselves, Moses would count the contributions and arrive at a final figure. The idiom used in Hebrew is 'to lift up the head:' it's Ibn Ezra who points out that when accountants used to record names row after row and then carry a figure forward from page to page in a ledger they would place it at the top - the head - of the page. Do we still do this today...?

So right from the outset of our story we see a sort of aversion to counting actual people. Instead, there is a set contribution that is to be made to ensure the upkeep of the Tent of Meeting. Everyone who is eligible pays exactly the same and that way we know the size of the community. And if Moses did not count that way, there would be trouble - as indeed happened during the reign of King David, when a census was immediately followed by a plague.

There's a question, though, about exactly when Moses did this counting. Remember that we noticed that after the revelation at Sinai, the chronology of the Torah becomes disrupted. The events of this week's Torah portion take place before the instructions for, and the building of, the Mishkan, the desert tabernacle. And most of the commentators who suggest that Moses didn't carry out the census until the beginning of the book of Numbers (which is where we find the actual figures).

But think for a moment what we know about Moses. He's not the kind of man who is completely in charge of his impulses. We remember that business with the Egyptian he buried. Soon he's going to smash the tablets carrying the first ten commandments written by God's own hand. And of course in future there's going to be that incident with the rock. No: I think we have to assume that Moses went ahead and started counting and collecting those half-shekels just about as soon as the revelation from Sinai ended.

And if he did, I want to suggest that perhaps it was a mistake. Though it's a mistake that creates a narrative that will govern the rest of the book of Shemot, and has something to teach us, as well, about the communities we build today.

On the face of it, the half-shekel tax is a very fair system. Anyone who is eligible pays it: all eligible people pay exactly the same. Ramban observes that it was collected by people dropping it off at the door of the Mishkan when they came - so there was no need for any kind of personal interaction with Moses - very convenient for him.

But I wonder how the people felt about it. I wonder how the women - who play such a critical role in the Exodus narrative - felt about not being counted: I wonder how poor people felt about paying the same as the rich people. Perhaps people began to ask themselves:

*If everyone is giving the same but some of us are left out, how is that fair?*

*If everyone is giving the same but some of us are left out, how are we a community?*

*If everyone is giving the same but some of us are left out, what about the rest of us who stood at Sinai?*

And so on. We can imagine the conversations going around the camp as those half-shekels - grudgingly - piled up at the door of the Tent of Meeting. We can imagine the mood of the Israelites as they pointed at them.

And if the people were asking those questions, I think that Moses unwittingly set up the basis for the infidelity that was to follow. After all, if the God of Sinai saw them as just an indistinguishable mass, why shouldn't the people just build their own God out of their own property and get on with worshipping it? At least they could express themselves properly that way! And so the Golden Calf is built - as the first, if misguided, community project - while all those silver half-shekels get left in the doorway.

Yet, there is a good end to the story. After the Calf debacle, another building project will arise. As I discussed a couple of weeks ago, it's entirely different to both the census and the Golden Calf. How? Because everybody gives in a different way. First, they give voluntarily, not because they are taxed or angry. And second, everybody literally gives in a different way - the people who brought the gold didn't bring the scarlet, the people who gave bronze didn't give those skins that we don't know what they are. In the census, the people who give are indistinguishable. In the Mishkan, every individual makes their own, recognizable contribution. And it is out of these differences that true community is made.

So to go back to where I started: there is a deeper reason that we don't count Jews for a minyan and resort, instead, to 'not-counting' in various ways. Yes, there is the idea that the census once brought on an actual plague; but I think that what we learn from Moses' mistake is that we risk a far greater plague if we think of our communities purely in terms of numbers. If anything, that kind of counting is a way of saying to people 'you don't count.' And that's no way to create a community. Instead, we need to look to the model of the Mishkan - the multiple, colorful, beautiful different ways that individuals give, and act, to create communities that endure and thrive.