

KI SISA (EXODUS 30:11-34:35)

How Do I Count Thee? ...

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

QUESTION: What is the significance of the following verse? *Deliver Your People, and bless Your inheritance; tend them and uplift them forever.* (Psalms, 28:9)

HINT: The verse has ten words (in the original Hebrew).

ANSWER: This verse is commonly used to count the men in a Minyan. When you walk into Shul and want to know if the required quorum of ten has arrived, it is customary not to count people directly. Rather than pointing to Tom, Dick, and Harry while saying “One, two, three...” instead we recite, “*Hoshia es amecha...Deliver Your People...*”

Why don't we count people? It actually goes back to the census in this week's Torah Portion.

The Nation of Israel had sinned by worshiping the Golden Calf. This sin led to a plague that killed thousands. After the plague, G-d wanted to 1) provide Moses with a means to count the survivors, and 2) provide Israel with a Mitzvah that would serve to atone for their sin.

“When you will take a census of the Israelites ... every man will give to G-d an atonement for his soul ... and there will be no plague among them when counting them. This is what they should give ... a half-shekel as a portion to G-d. The wealthy may not give more, and the poor may not give less than a half-shekel...” (Exodus, 30:12-14)

This money was to be counted, giving Moses an accurate census of the contributors. The silver was melted down and used to make the sockets that supported the beams of the Tabernacle. In subsequent years, the half-shekels were used to purchase communal offerings.

A half-shekel is not a great deal of money. In fact, Midrash Tanchuma (Section 10) tells us that Moses expected that “atonement money” would be a large amount, comparable to the fines levied for some of the various sins listed in the Torah. Certainly, the sin of the Golden Calf was a heinous crime for which the Israelites would have to pay dearly. To his surprise, the amount was nominal, small enough that “*the poor may not give less...*”

How did we get caught up in worshiping the Golden Calf? How could we have strayed so far from the Second Commandment --“*You will have no other gods before Me*”? (Ibid, 20:3)

Actually, it was only a small group that began to worship the calf. And look at what they said: “*This is your god, Israel, who took you out of Egypt.*” (32:4)

Why did the worshipers say, “...*YOUR** god, Israel, who took YOU out of Egypt*”? Why didn’t they say “*this is OUR god... who took US out of Egypt*”?

The reason is that WE were not the ones who worshiped the Golden Calf! Rashi explains that the original Calf worshipers were the “*mixed multitude*,” (Ibid, 12:38) the Egyptian “converts” who joined us in leaving Egypt. They began the idolatry, and enticed some of the Israelites to join them. But the overwhelming majority did not participate in the idolatry.

So what was the problem? What did we do that was so terrible? Why is the Golden Calf considered a great national sin when most of our people didn’t get involved? Why did Israel need an atonement at all? They didn’t do anything!!!!

That’s exactly the problem. They didn’t do anything.

When Moses came down from the mountain, he stared in amazement at what had happened in his absence. “*Whoever is for G-d, come to me!*” and *all of the Levites gathered toward him.* (Ibid, 32:26) (For this reason, the Levites were exempt from donating half-shekels for the Tabernacle --Tosafos, Menachos, 21b)

Why just the Levites? Where was everyone else?! Wouldn’t ANYONE take a stand for what was right?

A small percentage of the nation was guilty of a sin of COMMISSION. The rest of the people were guilty of a crime of OMISSION. You can’t just watch a Golden Calf being worshiped and shrug your shoulders and go about your business.

When you count the people of Israel, you need to count people who are willing to stand up and be counted! People who are willing to DO SOMETHING! It doesn’t have to be something overwhelming. It can be a half-shekel of *Tzedakah*. But it’s got to be something!

“Who is a Jew” is a controversial and divisive question. But there is a more fundamental question. **What** is a Jew? We are defined not just by who we are, but also by what we do. Therefore, Moses counted Jews by collecting donations for the Tabernacle. Therefore, when we need a Minyan, we don’t just count heads. We recite a Psalm.

In Yiddish, when one wishes to ask his fellow how he is, he says, “*Vos macht ir?*” (Literal translation -- “*What do you do?*”) An alternate version is “*Vos macht ah Yid?*” (Literal translation -- “*What does a Jew [i.e., you,] do?*”)

The other day I overheard the following conversation:

*“Sholom Aleichem! Vos macht ah Yid?” (*What does a Jew do?)

Reply: “Mitzvos and Maasim Tovim (good deeds)!”

Have a great Shabbos.

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