

Two for Ki Tisa

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Parshat Ki Tisa

Our Torah reading this week begins with G*d instructing Moses to take a census of the Israelites. Well, that's reasonable, and nothing particularly worthy of remark, but the *method* of counting is fascinating. Each individual to be counted is to make a donation of half a shekel, as a "soul-ransom," and the half-shekels are then counted to determine the number of people.

The method seems quite direct – take the same donation from each person and then count the donations. But – Oh! – the lessons that this method contains!

First of all, the donation is a "soul-ransom." We donated a small amount of money, which was used to pay for the fixtures of the Tabernacle, the portable Sanctuary which we carried with us during our forty years' wandering in the wilderness, as a ransom for our souls. The word *ransom* (in Hebrew, כפר, *kofer*) is used only three times in the Torah, and each time it denotes the money paid in lieu of the death penalty by one who took a human life in circumstances which did not constitute murder. (In modern secular jurisprudence, this would be called "manslaughter.") By giving a "soul-ransom," we acknowledged that we, too, were guilty of unintentionally taking human life. What human life did we take? The soldiers of Mitzrayim (Egypt) who drowned in the Border-Sea (*Yam Suf/Sof*) as the price of our freedom!

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Second, Moses is instructed that each individual over twenty years of age shall give half a shekel. Traditional commentaries interpret this as including each *man* over twenty, the minimum age for military service, but the text does not so specify. Further, the text does not exclude the Tribe of Levi (whose members were exempt from military service) nor those over sixty (who were also excluded from the military), and, although it is expressed in the masculine gender, Hebrew uses the grammatically masculine to refer to groups including both male and female. Each individual over the age of twenty, then, must give the same amount; as the text (Exodus 30:15) says, **The rich shall not give more, nor the poor less, than this half-shekel, for it is a soul-ransom given as an offering to the Eternal.** The soul-ransom of each individual is exactly the same! Not until more than 3000 years later did the United States become the first nation to assert in its founding document that “All men [today we would say all humans] are created equal”!

Third, each individual’s donation was only half a shekel, not a whole shekel. It takes two to tango, and it takes two to make a whole shekel. Each individual is only a half, incomplete. The essence of the Torah’s teaching is that all existence is relational, that only through relating do we become complete, for our human relationships educate us to our G*d-relationship.

The sanctity of life, even the life of our enemy, of the one who seeks to slay or enslave us. The equality of all individuals, rich or poor, noble or common, Moses or the drawer of water. The need to relate, for each individual alone is only a half. To these profound truths may we soon be drawn.

Shabbat Shalom.

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