

## ***The Universal and the Particular***

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*Parshat B'midbar*

**Take a census of the entire Israelite community, family by family, . . . counting the men over twenty years of age. . . . A representative of each tribe, head of his clan, shall be with you. (Numbers 1:2-4)**

Our first and obvious question is why Moses is commanded to count only the adult males. The Torah itself, without actually articulating the question, gives (1:3) an answer – **all those who are capable of serving in the army**. The trek through the wilderness was dangerous, and Moses and the Israelites felt the need for a military response to the predations of brigands and other enemies, so it was understandable that the census included only the potential soldiers.

But there is a far more interesting point in this Torah portion. The census combines the universal and the particular so thoroughly that they cannot be separated.

The first stich tells us that, while the census is to determine the total male population over age twenty, they are to be counted family by family. The count is made according to the particular, but the total is to be according to the universal.

Well, that is simple practicality and need not necessarily carry any deep philosophical implication, but the Torah then goes on to tell us something very curious. A high-ranking representative of each tribe was to stand beside Moses and Aaron as they conducted the count. Why? It is, perhaps understandable that a representative of each tribe be present when that tribe was counted; after all, a tribal representative would likely know where to find all the members of his tribe. Why, however, need the representatives of *all* the tribes be present *throughout* the count?

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Did they not trust Moses and Aaron to count fairly?

Moses and Aaron represent the entire community collectively; the tribal leaders represent the individual tribes. The census could be conducted only by the combination of the universal and the particular. Further, each tribal leader had to be present for the counting of the other tribes as well, not only his own. *All* the particulars must be present, and the explicitly universal must be there as well. It is not enough to declare that the universal is made up of the sum of the particulars. It is, of course, but the universal also has an identity of its own.

As it was when Moses and Aaron took the census of the Israelite community, so it is today. And not only in census-taking, but in every aspect of life. And not only within the Jewish community, but for all humanity. Indeed, we may someday reach a consciousness that teaches us that the principle of inextricably linking the universal and the particular transcends even humanity and extends to all of life, to all Creation!

We may, from time to time, need to emphasize our particularisms. It is only by stating how we are different from others that we can define our identity. And it need not entail saying explicitly, “We are not this; we are not that.” By stating our defining characteristics, we affirm who we are.

But that affirmation, that individuation, is only a tool, a means by which we reach toward the universal. I must define myself in order to enable me to relate to you. If I relate only to myself, then I have not attained a relationship. Our master and teacher Martin Buber spoke of the *I-It* (taking the other as object) and the *I-Thou* (affirming the other as partner) connections. He did not – with good reason – include I-Me, for I-Me is not a relationship. But, as he taught us, only when I say “Thou” can I truly become “I.”

To the recognition of both the universal and the particular may we soon be led.

Shabbat Shalom.

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