

**Pardes from Jerusalem - Parshat Ki Tissa**  
**The Inherent Value of the Individual**  
**הערכה עצמית - Cultivating a Healthy Self-Esteem**

“וידבר ה' אל משה לאמור: **כי תשא** את ראש בני ישראל **לפקודיהם**, ונתנו איש כופר נפשו לה' **בפקוד** אותם, ולא יהיה בהם נגף **בפקוד** אותם. זה יתנו כל העובר על **הפקודים**, **מחצית השקל** בשקל הקודש, עשרים גרה השקל, **מחצית השקל** תרומה לה'” (שמות ל, יא-יג).

“And HaShem spoke to Moshe saying: **When you take a census** of *Bnei Yisrael* according to their **numbers**, every man shall give HaShem an atonement for his soul **when counting** them, so that there will not be a plague among them **when counting** them. This shall they give - everyone who passes through **the census - a half shekel** of the sacred shekel, the shekel is twenty *gerah*, **half a shekel** as a contribution/offering/donation to HaShem” (*Shemot* 30:11-13).

*Parshat Ki Tissa* begins with the remaining instructions for the building of the *Mishkan*. Each male over twenty years old was obligated to contribute a half shekel. The Slonimer Rebbe (R' Sholom Noach Berezovsky, Yerushalaym, d.2000) addresses in his magnum opus, the *Netivot Shalom*, that while the obligatory contribution equaled 10 *gerah*, the commandment employs the term “half shekel” instead. Everyone had to have a part in the *Mishkan*, and everyone had to realize that they were only a “half.” He explains that here the Torah is teaching us that “sets” are inherent in the creation of the *mishkan*. Each individual is never more than a half (*nor less*), until that person unites with another. In this way we become united as one, as a whole, the fundamental and essential building block and requirement for the *Shechinah* to dwell and manifest Her Presence.

The Holy Zohar emphasizes this by stating:

...”דקודשא בריך הוא לא שריא באתר פגים...” (זוהר א', רטז:).

“The Holy Blessed One does not dwell in a fragmented and incomplete place...” (Zohar I, 216b).

According to the *Halacha*, the Jewish Law, even a poor man had to contribute his half shekel, even if it meant that he would have to sell his outer garment or take a loan in order to raise his contribution. The commentaries point out that the reason why the Torah is being quite demanding in this *mitzvah*, is to teach the inherent value of each individual. The *Mishkan* would thus be incomplete without each person's contribution, with no regard to a person's personal financial status. Both the poorest and the wealthiest were obligated to contribute the same. We learn from this that the *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence, who manifested Her presence in the *Mishkan*, dwells ONLY in a complete sanctuary, one in which every individual is represented and present (notwithstanding that “every individual” actually represented his family). In the spiritual terms, this means that even the spiritually poorest person possesses something of value and must contribute his/her particular “half shekel.”

The term “*Ki Tissa*” is usually translated as “when you take a census.” However, that is not really what it means. The literal translation means “when you elevate and raise the heads of *Bnei Yisrael*.” We are compelled to ask what else is the Torah teaching us by expressing this *mitzvah* with the words “*Ki Tissa*,” rather than the phrase that actually means “when you count - *Ki Tifkod*?”

The Ishbitzer Rebbe (R' Mordechai Yosef Leiner, Poland, d.1854) explains in his main work, the *Mei HaShiloach*, that from the usage of the term “*Ki Tissa*” we learn that this census was more than just a typical counting of people. In a regular census taking, people tend to feel as if they are reduced to a mere number, where a person’s self-esteem may be challenged. (*We as Jews, due to our recent history during the Holocaust, have become even more sensitive to the de-humanizing effect reducing a person to a number has on a person’s sense of self-worth*). Not so in a Torah census. Each person was “elevated” at the moment he passed before Moshe *Rabbeinu* to contribute his half shekel. At that moment it was revealed to him that his being and purpose here in this world was unique and that it would be incomplete without him. At the same time each person realized that the same was true for everyone else as well. No matter how many holy *tzadikim* contributed, the *Shechinah* would not dwell in the *Mishkan* until each and every individual made his contribution as well, regardless of perceived or external-based status in the community. As we read further on:

“העשיר לא ירבה והדל לא ימעיט ממחצית השקל לתת את תרומת ה'... (שמות ל, טו).”

“The wealthy shall not increase and the destitute shall not decrease from half a shekel --- to give the portion of HaShem...” ( *Shemot* 30:15).

R' Nosson, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov’s main disciple and scribe (Ukraine, d. 1844), teaches that when each person brought his half shekel, what each person spiritually contributed was his *nekudah tova* - his one point of goodness. Each Jew contains within something very holy, hidden inside which is his especially own. This one point is far beyond any defined, limited and finite object in the physical realm. The half shekel in this regard serves as the equalizer for all people. Therefore, what actually built the foundation of the *Mishkan*, was each person’s sense of self-esteem, self-worth and sense of being special.

Rav Jonathan Sacks, z”l, explains in *Covenant and Conversation*, in 2010, why it is in fact dangerous to count Jews. This is referenced in the opening verse,

“... ולא יהיה בהם נגף בפקוד אותם.”

“.... so that there will not be a plague among them **when counting** them.”

We are a tiny people. The late Milton Himmelfarb (American sociographer, d.2006) once wrote that the total population of Jews throughout the world is smaller than a small statistical error in the Chinese census. We are a fifth of a per cent of the population of the world: by any normal standards too small to be significant. Nor is this true only now. It was then. In one of his concluding addresses in *Devarim*, Moshe said:

“לא מרובכם מכל העמים חשק ה' בכם, ויבחר בכם, כי אתם המעט מכל העמים” (דברים ז, ז).

“The Lord did not set his affection on you and chose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples” (*Devarim* 7:7).

The danger in counting Jews is that if they believed, even for a moment, that there is strength in numbers, the Jewish people would long ago have given way to despair.

How then do you estimate the strength of the Jewish people? (*How does the individual estimate his sense of importance, his value, his worth*)? To this the Torah gives an answer of surpassing beauty. Ask Jews to give, and then count their contributions. Numerically we are small, but in terms of our contributions to civilization and humankind, we are vast.

Above and beyond all the contributions that Jews have made in physics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychiatry, economics, literature, music, medicine (earning 48 Nobel prizes), law, industry finance, academic life, the media and politics there remains the most important contribution. It is, of course, the Jewish contribution to the life of the spirit that that is not only unique but has shaped the entire course of Western civilization. Somehow this tiny people has produced and continues to produce an unceasing flow of patriarchs and matriarchs, priests, poets and prophets, masters of halacha and Aggadah, codifiers and commentators, philosophers and mystics, sages and saints, in a way that almost defies comprehension. It was not once that the Jewish imagination caught fire, but in century after century, sometimes under the worst persecution known to any nation on earth. Time and again, in the wake of tragedy, the Jewish people renewed itself in a burst of creativity.

If you want to know the strength of the Jewish people, ask them to give, **and then count the contributions**. That is the majestic idea at the opening of this week's *parsha*.

To win the battle of the spirit, the victory of heart, mind and soul, you do not need numbers. You need dedication, commitment, study, prayer, vision, courage, ideals and hope. You need a people who are instinctively inclined to give and to contribute. **Give, then count the contributions: the finest way ever devised to measure the strength of a people.**

I would like to suggest that in addition to all the requirements that Rav Sacks has enumerated as necessary to win the battle of the spirit, the Divine is asking of each of us to cultivate the awareness of our inherent self-worth, our value and our unique reasons for each one of us having been created --- essential ingredients for a healthy self-esteem. What is the *nekudah tova* that our Creator has gifted each of us?

Dr. Rabbi Avraham J. Twerski, z'l, writes in "*Let Us Make Man: Self Esteem Through Jewishness*": Of everything in the world, the human being is closest to oneself, and yet is often most distant from oneself. This remoteness results in distortion of the self-perception, and such distortion may cause further alienation from the self, resulting in a self-reinforcing vicious cycle...a substantial majority of emotional or behavioral problems are due to one common underlying factor - an unjustified and unwarranted feeling of low self-esteem.

May the Divine bless us with the embodied sense and knowledge that we each possess something of worth to contribute to the world, no more and no less than others, and as well, that we each need everyone else's "half" to become whole and complete. In this way we can participate fully in making this world a dignified, compassionate and sacred home for the Divine --- a real *Mishkan/Mikdash* mamash.