

Naso: The Dignity Of Man

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Jews don't count people. Instead the Torah creates a system of tabulating the population without actually counting human beings. This indirect counting scheme is delineated in parshat Ki Tisa: each citizen donates a half-shekel to the mikdash. Calculating the final sum of shekels (and dividing by half), provides an accurate population figure, without physically counting heads. Warning against the actual counting of people, the Torah sternly cautions: "when you count the Jewish people [insure] that each delivers a half-shekel to avoid a catastrophic plague". The Torah indicates dire consequences for counting human beings; sadly, Dovid Hamelech, mistakenly counted actual people without employing an "intermediary" half-shekel. This miscue unleashed a plague which claimed the lives of 70,000 people.

Jews avoid counting people for several reasons – some of those reasons based upon mystical concerns. One of the more apparent dangers of counting people is the risk of depersonalizing individual identity. Each human being is born autonomous and different. Unlike any other creature, Man enjoys individual identity and the capacity for personal decisions. Equipped with freedom of choice and individual personality, we actively craft our world, our relationships, and our identity. We stand alone in this universe with the capacity to personally shape our life. By respecting individualism, we respect the Divine image, which G-d implanted in each human being. Appreciating the complexity of the human condition and respecting the dignity of each individual is a "religious calling"- to revere Man as the pinnacle of G-d's creation. Counting humans and lumping them into larger populations imperils human individuality. Generally, when people are collected into larger groups, personal identity dwindles; when we become a "number" we forget that we have a name. The Nazis tattooed us with numbers in a vicious attempt to eradicate personal identity. Directly counting human beings can have similar, though less diabolical, effects.

For this reason, when conducting a census, we don't count people but, instead, we collect coins which, in turn are counted. The half-shekel underscores that each person possesses "value" and independence, and that this "worth" can't be muddled by 'grouping'. Providing monetary

value reinforces personal worth and counters the depersonalization of human identity.

The modern world is obsessed with counting human beings-directly or indirectly- and our individuality is quickly fading. The science of statistics is crucial in predicting and navigating our future. Without this ability we remain vulnerable to the whims of uncertainty. Fortunately, when we employ statistical tools, we can attempt to predict trends, plan our future and steady our world. More and more, however, "Statistics" convinces us that we are merely a "statistic", faceless numbers inhabiting a predetermined "graph of life" governed by statistical probability. It is becoming more difficult to assert personal destiny rather than sheepishly succumbing to cultural and societal trends. Additionally, our individualism is also challenged by the dynamic of "group think". We surrender personal evaluation for the security of collective opinion. The internet has created a global forum for sharing information but also for encouraging "group think". We consume content, in part, not based on personal interest but based on the level of interest this information has generated amongst others. We are drawn to viral content simply because it seems to be popular amongst millions. Additionally, social media helps us craft comfortable echo chambers which "pad" our exposure and relieve us of the burden of confronting different ideas. Without exposure to different ideas our own identity often remains shallow and formulaic. The internet enables the sharing of information but, sadly, forces us into "shared" opinion and the abdication of personal identity.

A world which doesn't cultivate individual identity disregards human dignity. Man possesses Divine dignity precisely because he is empowered to choose his own fate and to craft his own identity. Ignoring the dignity of Man yields a dangerous society. Respecting human dignity less, we are more prone to manipulate other human beings. If we fail to appreciate human dignity we tend to "objectify" others, treating one another more "instrumentally" – as objects to be manipulated for our own interest rather than Divine images deserving of the same dignity we crave for ourselves. The Torah was aware of the dangers of depersonalizing human identity and mandated a counting method to avoid the loss of dignity. In the modern circus of group think, statistics, echo chambers, objectification of others and "identity politics", we

constantly face the challenge of respecting human dignity. We no longer donate half-shekel, but we must continually underscore human worth.

Yet, despite the significance and symbolism of the half shekel, this “process” is omitted in parshat Naso in the Torah’s description of the census of the Levi'im. For some reason, this census is different and the Levi'im are shielded from the dangers inherent in a standard population census. For some reason, the dignity of a Levi, will not be endangered by actual counting and the Torah doesn’t stress the half-shekel method. When describing the counting of Levi'im the Torah doesn’t issue the ominous warning surrounding physical counting of people. It is unclear if the Levi'im were actually counted with a half-shekel, but either way the Torah’s doesn’t record the half-shekel requirement for counting the Levi'im.

Unlike the rest of the population, the Levi'im weren’t just counted as “numbers”. They are being tallied so that they can be assigned tasks in the mishkan. Some will port the mishkan from encampment to encampment while others will guard the entry gates of the mishkan; still others will be musically trained to accompany sacrifices with song. They will commit to lives of duty and of sacred mission. They will join a community of meaning and of common purpose. Their lives won’t be self-serving and won’t be driven by self-interest. Duty and mission will provide them with enduring dignity. They can be counted by head without concern that they will be dehumanized or reduced to statistics.

Every human possesses individual identity and innate dignity endowed by G-d. When humans employ their personal freedom to commit to a “life larger than themselves” their dignity augments. Duty, mission and service to others crowns the Levi'im with a dignity and nobility which isn’t threatened by counting them directly.