

Parashat Ki Tissa: At This Time It Is Important to be Human

Dear Friends,

Chilling timing!

In the midst of a worldwide epidemic, this week's parasha promises that those who participate in the census by giving half of a (biblical) shekel, are guaranteed not to be wiped out by a plague (or a battle, or simply by life).

These are the opening verses of this week's parasha, Ki Tissa:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: When you take a census of the Israelite people according to their enrollment, each shall pay the LORD a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled. This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay:... a half-shekel as an offering to the LORD. ... the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel when giving the LORD's offering as expiation for your soul. (Sh'mot 30:11-15)

Many questions arise from these opening verses, which also give the parasha its name: what is the connection between a census and money? Why half a shekel? Why does a person have to give a ransom for himself? Does payment of half of a shekel really guarantee a person not to be affected? And... is this parasha relevant for us today (Spoiler: of course it is - very much so!)?

On the literal level, it is important to explain that the collection of money was not to fund the work of the Mishkan. Rather, it is a fascinating method of conducting a census. In the Torah it is expressly forbidden to count Bnei Yisrael. It is perceived as a terrible sin which causes death and destruction! (I will explain this further later on.) But surely it is necessary to conduct a census now and then - especially in preparation for war. Therefore, the parasha provides a method for taking one, through each person's giving of half of a shekel. The money is then counted, not the people. The funds collected do not go to the leader or to the state! Rather, they are used for the spiritual work in Ohel Mo'ed, for everyone's benefit. In this way, the money was both a method of counting people, and also of atoning for the need for the census.

There is a correlation between being considered a human being and the act of giving. As long as a person is only receiving - and he receives constantly: oxygen, sun, food, water, etc. - he is part of the "fixtures" of the world, part of the circle of life. This kind of existence does not qualify him or her to be called a human being, or a mensch, in Yiddish. The moment he gives of himself, beyond what any natural organism is programmed to give, he or

she turns into a meaningful, distinct element, and only then he or she is counted (mitpaked, in Hebrew) through the process of taking on a role in the world (tafkid, from the same root).

In other words, giving gives meaning to our existence.

But humility is also very important! This is the reason for the requirement to give only half a shekel, and not a whole one. I believe that every person is, in essence, whole. No one is broken, defective, spoiled, or only a half. But our wholeness is in our being part of something bigger - even more whole, if that is possible - than ourselves.

We will never be THE giver. This title belongs only to the Creator (or to nature, for those who are uncomfortable with the Divine narrative) who does not cease giving to us freely: solid ground beneath our feet, air to breathe, water, food, sun, light and shade, physical pleasure, mechanisms of growth and healing, motivation, and more.

It's challenging! Because recognizing that I am part of a something bigger means that I need others. And needing others is difficult! But no man is an island, as the poet John Donne wrote five hundred years ago - both in terms of responsibility for others and in terms of needing others.

When a person goes into isolation ("quarantine" as it is called now) he is expressing his deep, complete humanity! The quarantine is not for him or herself, but for the entire human sphere in which he lives. He believes that he is a part of a whole and recognizes his responsibility for the health of others - not only his family, but people he does not know at all. On the other hand, he is capable of placing himself in isolation, because he trusts that others will look after his needs while he is isolated.

There are two places in the book of Proverbs, the book of wisdom attributed to King Solomon, in which it says **Charity will save from death** (10:2, and 11:4). I do not dare promise that charity will heal cancer or any other disease, and I don't think it can prevent the physical death of our body. But charity - and giving in general, so hints Parashat Ki Tissa - is a ransom which has the power to prevent any plague. It does not protect the body; it redeems the soul. It prevents spiritual and mental death. It saves us from two spiritual plagues: despair, on the one hand - "what do I have to offer, after all? I am insignificant in the world" - and an inflated ego and exaggerated self-importance on the other.

As I mentioned earlier, the Torah expressly forbids counting people directly. A person who "just is" - if there is really such a thing - does not get counted. He is an organism just like any other miraculous organism. The moment he gives, he is counted as a human being.

In the Jewish tradition a person is counted as part of a minyan when he reaches the age of bar mitzvah. In other words, he accepts the burden of mitzvot, of responsibility; the burden of significantly contributing to the community and to human society. (Of course, we also count women from bat mitzvah age and up as part of the minyan!)

Let us recall that this parasha takes place when Moshe is still on Mount Sinai. He will descend shortly...! But when he does, later in the parasha, he will discover that the day before, the people, led by Aharon his brother, had created a golden calf, and were totally engrossed in celebrations.

Bnei Yisrael were in a desperate crisis. It had been 39 days since Moshe entered the cloud on the mountain and disappeared, and they felt abandoned, alone, and lost in the great wilderness of life. Aharon, knowing the human spirit, understood that in times of crisis, people connect to a deep part within themselves that longs to give! Giving, we're taught, saves a person from death. It gives meaning and strength - the two things a person needs when he or she loses their path.

Even though the Golden Calf was considered a terrible sin, neither Aharon nor the people were actually punished for it! Moshe returned to the mountain, begged forgiveness, using the same verses we repeat over and over during the Yom Kippur services, and forgiveness was granted.

Perhaps it was granted because the story of the Golden Calf was not only a grave sin. It was first and foremost an expression of the amazing human need to give. True, there are better ways to do so, and therefore the Golden Calf was and is considered a false idol, but the basis of its creation was an expression of human greatness - our innate desire to give and to be part of a community, to be a significant part of creation.

Therefore, this time - as the plague is running amok among us - is a wonderful time to give!

There are many ways of giving. A smile, gentleness, understanding and patience - these, too, are giving. Caring for others at this time - those who are in physical isolation, and those who are "only" in mental isolation - is a tried and true method of maintaining humanity, hope, and meaning. If the plague is Din (i.e., judgment, boundaries and isolation), giving is Chesed (loving kindness). It is the spiritual antidote and the medicine.

We don't yet know where this plague is heading. We don't know how it will affect humanity, how it will change us. It is not yet clear how much suffering is in store for us. It is simply out of our control at the moment (beyond obeying the directives of the health system),

But we can all be counted! We can all do good in myriad ways. We can give. And by doing so, we can earn the most important title there is, "human."

Shabbat Shalom and good health!

Elisha

When I give of myself, I exist. When I give of myself, I am significant. Giving of myself signifies that I am part of a whole that is bigger than I am. Giving of myself signifies

that I have a role in the world. Giving of myself means I count and am counted. Giving of myself means that I am a human being.