

# INDIVIDUALS AND COLLECTIVES

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Be'er Mayim Chaim: The Ibn Ezra notes that the "you" of this *pasuk* is singular, but still believes that it was a larger group that was the real recipient of the message. Many people were needed for the difficult job of taking all the pieces and constructing the finished structure. He argues that Moshe (singular) was commanded to manufacture all the different *kelim* of the *mishkan*, but delegated the actual work to others (plural). Similarly, he was commanded here to assemble the *mishkan* - seemingly individually - but assigned the work to others. The Ohr HaChaim takes exception to this approach, preferring that of Chazal, that Moshe indeed erected the *mishkan* single-handedly when the people together were unable to assemble it.

I see a theme at work here that can explain some of the anomalies in the work orders for the *mishkan*. Why is it that the Torah sometimes uses the plural, and at other times the singular? When we consider the roles of individuals and the collective, we find a way to explain the different usages.

We start with a Mishnah in Avos.<sup>1</sup> "Moshe was meritorious, and influenced the many to be meritorious." This is difficult to understand. Whatever it was that Moshe merited, the words imply that only he achieved that merit. If so, whatever merit he enabled the public to gain must be something very different - and in that case, unrelated to what he merited himself! The two phrases in the Mishnah would therefore appear to be unrelated!

HKBH's calculus, however, works differently. Consider a person who joins with others to form a *minyan* for davening. He merits the mitzvah of his own davening. Additionally, however, he merits the mitzvah of everyone else's davening, because without him, there would not be a *minyan*! In this way, he enjoys his own merit, as well as that of all his associates.

The building of the *mishkan* is analogous to forming a *minyan*, with the important difference that the magic number in *mishkan*-building is 600,000. With fewer people than this, HKBH does not visit His Shechinah upon a place. Thus, the donations of no less than 600,000 Jews were necessary for the construction of the *mishkan*. The different materials that went into its composition afforded an opportunity for the collaboration of the entire nation. Each Jew who donated a bit of gold, silver, or colored thread joined in the merit of everyone else, since without his contribution, there could be no *mishkan*. Some substances, like the precious stones, could not be brought piecemeal, and the individual donors would seem to enjoy an exclusive in regard to that merit. Upon reflection, however, we realize that this is not the case. Without every bit of thread for the coverings of the

*mishkan*, the *avnei milu'im* would serve no purpose. Therefore, the donor of any substance at all shared in the mitzvah of bringing even the precious stones.

It is not a coincidence that the Torah calls for the collection of thirteen materials for the construction of the *mishkan*. Thirteen in gematria equals *echad*, one. The full list of donation opportunities allowed all the Bnei Yisrael to come together as one, allowing each and every person to share in the merit of building the *mishkan*.

Now, this *achdus* could easily be destroyed by the wish of some people that they be allowed to donate the holiest items. For this reason, the Torah emphasizes, "And I will dwell among them,"<sup>2</sup> meaning each and every one of them. Because their donations are all crucial, they can be seen as all sharing in every part of the *mishkan*, no matter what they actually donated.

Returning to the question with which we began, it is possible that the Torah sometimes uses "you" in the singular for a different reason than we discussed above. That "you" may not refer to Moshe at all, but to the Bnei Yisrael as a collective. While the instructions at the beginning of the *parshah* are all given in the plural ( *vayikchu li terumah, v'asu li mikdosh, v'asu aron*), the Torah later switches to the singular form. Once the Bnei Yisrael begin the process of collecting and building, they become united as a single, crucial entity necessary to bring the Shechinah.

This argument for employing the singular only applies to the general construction of the *mishkan*, which requires, so to speak, six hundred thousand equal shareholders. The singular used in this regard conveys the idea of the *achdus*, the commonality of purpose, of all the contributors.

The argument does not apply in other areas. It does not apply to the *kelim* of the *mishkan*, where the actions of Bezalel and other individual craftsmen were critical. Any use of the singular form of "you" can refer to the individuals who made the crucial contribution of material or ingenuity.

It certainly does not apply to the actual assembly of the *mishkan* at the time of its inauguration. When the Torah instructs Moshe to erect it, it can be assumed to apply to Moshe alone, not as a directive to him to summon together whatever help he needed from the people to get the job done. Moshe's role could be unique, without making the *mishkan* less suitable for the Shechinah.

1. Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Shemos 26:30 2. Avos 5:21 3. Shemos 25:8