

DON'T EMBARRASS YOUR ANCESTORS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Take a count of the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their heads of households, with the number of their names, every male by head." [1:2]

Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Hertzberg z"l, my wife's grandfather, looks at two elements of the counting - that it was done by family (specifically, by the heads of households), and by "head," or as *Rashi* explains, by a coin - one half-shekel given for each head.

Why was a coin needed? Because the act of giving indicated that the giver was a Jew, a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The children of Israel share three traits: they are "*bayshanim*," modest and sensitive to embarrassment, "*rachmanim*," merciful, and "*gomlei chasadim*," doers of acts of kindness and generosity. By giving willingly, lovingly, the giver provides a sign that he is part of this nation.

Rav Hertzberg then goes on to offer a deeper understanding of the counting by family. He says that each Jew must see him or herself within the context of one's family, and always keep the image of one's father and grandfather in his mind. When contemplating any action, one must consider whether it will embarrass his or her ancestors, or increase respect for them.

The *Torah* tells us that we learn to fear G-d from fear of our parents - and specifically our fathers, who most often seem to take ultimate responsibility for discipline in the home. If a person turns out bad, he embarrasses not only himself, but his parents and ancestors, and those who see him will denigrate the parents who brought up such a child (especially the father who didn't discipline well).

One must see this at every level. The *Medrash* says that *Yosef* saw the image of his father before him, and this kept him from sinning with Potiphar's wife. Even in private, we have an obligation to look not only at our immediate family, but at our glorious ancestors and our line back to Sinai - and to behave in a way that brings respect not only upon ourselves, but to the entire extended family of the House of Israel.

Text Copyright © 1996 Rabbi Yaakov Menken and Project Genesis, Inc.

The author is the Director of Project Genesis.

