

A WHOLE PART OF THE WHOLE

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Take a census of the entire congregation of Israel, according to their families, according to the house of their fathers." [1:2]

Why does G-d command a count at this point in the Torah? From the commentary of Rabbi Shamshon Raphael Hirsch, we can derive two complimentary answers to this question.

First of all, a count done in the wilderness serves no political or economic purpose. Rather, the count "testifies on itself" that it was done only for the sake of Torah, as evidenced by the previous verse which reads, "in the desert of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting" -- the Torah was given on Sinai, and it's "center" was the Tent of Meeting. The census served a religious function.

What was this religious purpose of the count? As Rabbi Hirsch points out, throughout Sefer Vayikra, the Book of Leviticus, we learned of all the obligations which the Nation of Israel had to the Mishkan, the Sanctuary. We also learned, at the end, about the sacrifices which each individual could offer as a voluntary commitment.

With all of this, a person might think that the nation could fulfill its obligations without him and his contribution, and as for himself, he could decide to offer no voluntary sacrifices of his own. We do not see that every individual is important as an individual.

The census contradicts this mistaken impression. Each person counts. He or she is unique, different from every other, with a unique function and unique contribution to make. Although this count included only the soldiers, males over age twenty, they served as public representatives for the larger nation. The count itself indicated how each individual was part of a family unit, part of a larger tribe, and a crucial building block in the larger whole. This count send a message for all generations: we each have something to contribute, and the entire Nation needs us!

Good Shabbos,

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