

RAISE YOUR HEAD

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah commands that a count of the Jewish people should be undertaken. Such a count was in fact taken a number of times during the sojourn of the people of Israel in the Sinai desert. What is noteworthy is the language - the words the Torah uses in ordering this count to take place.

The literal translation of those words is "When you raise the heads of the Jewish people to assess their numbers..." The Torah does not state simply "when you count the people of Israel." Instead it teaches us a very important lesson in Jewish and family life. A person who is counted and considers himself or herself to be part of the Jewish people has to do so by being a person with a raised head. That person has to feel that he or she is special, chosen, set aside for a particular mission in life. The raised head is the symbol of Jewish pride and determination.

The count of the Jewish people is not meant to be merely numerical. It is far more profound and meaningful. It is really a count-me-in type of equation. Thus the task of the leader of the people is not only to come up with an accurate population number but, perhaps even more importantly, to inspire and raise those being counted to a greater understanding of their role and purpose in being part of the Jewish people. For eventually, being counted as a member of the Jewish people requires commitment, effort and constant personal development.

We are all aware of the injunction not to count Jews directly, as in this week's parsha, where they were counted by the number of half shekels collected by the census takers. We read in the book of Shmuel that King Saul counted the Jewish people by assessing the number of individual sheep. The same lesson is involved in this rule as the idea mentioned in the previous paragraph - that the true count of the people of Israel is never only in the raw number of people present. It is in the worth of the individual, the pride and self-esteem of being Jewish - and that is not something that can easily be assessed by a number.

Coins and sheep are susceptible to being counted numerically - not the Jewish people or for that matter any human being. The influence of a life is something not given to physical measurement or numerical count. The Torah commands us to raise our heads, to become more knowledgeable, devoted and committed to its holy values, observances and spiritual outlook. Each individual Jew must feel and believe that he or she is special, unique, vital and necessary for the whole nation to exist and prosper.

People who feel "there is no difference if I am Jewish, observant, or part of a people" do themselves

and the Jewish people as a whole a great disservice. Only those who proudly raise their heads are truly part of the eternal count of the Jewish people.

Shabat shalom,

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com