

We have completed three of the five books of the Torah, and have just begun the fourth: Bamidbar, literally *in the wilderness*. As we have read many times, the path from being slaves of Pharaoh to becoming servants of HaShem is long and difficult – much like the path from childhood to adulthood. We need structure in order to function as not only as individuals, but also within our various groups and within humanity as a whole – concentric rings of structure that radiate from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic. For us, the center of these circles is our Torah, with its commandments, laws, and statutes. The next circles contain the many different structures in which we live and interact: Individual, partnership, family, community, profession, nation, etc. All of us have a whole array of duties and privileges within each of these circles, which functioning ideally, should ensure peace and prosperity for everyone. But there is a caveat: Group structures are made up of individuals, and if the individual parts are subjugated by the structure, those neatly conceived concentric circles will be plunged into chaos.

The manner of taking the census described in our Parashah tells us something about the importance of balancing the individual and the group. *se'u et rosh* – “lift the head” is a curious euphemism for counting people, but it gives us insight into the risky business of census taking. At the beginning of our reading, the men are counted, and each tribe is assigned a space within the camp (except the Levites, who serve HaShem and have no land). Organizing the camp is a necessary step toward stability and cohesion, as well as a means to assess military strength and ensure protection in case of attack. Focusing on the total number, which, of course, is the object of the endeavor, we often forget about the individual, making people interchangeable and replaceable. Disregarding the individual parts that make up the whole creates a breeding ground for apathy, lawlessness, and mindless herd behavior, ultimately destroying what we set out to achieve. People who are treated like nameless, faceless cogs in a huge wheel become easy prey for demagogues who know how to channel their anger, frustration, and fears. History has demonstrated this countless times and we have numerous examples today.

HaShem's directive *se'u et rosh* is an eloquent way to demonstrate that every individual counts in his or her own unique way. We are fashioned *b'tzelim Elohim* – in the image of HaShem, and each of us has something to contribute to the whole. Of course, HaShem speaks to us collectively, but HaShem also speaks to each of us individually. The second paragraph of the *shema yisrael* is a perfect example: After the first paragraph, which is entirely directed to the individual, the second addresses the group with admonitions about upholding the *mitzvot*, but near the end, switches back to the singular form to tell each one of us to discuss the *mitzvot* at home, on the road, when going to bed and upon arising, and to write them as *mezuzot* on our doorposts and gates. The final sentence returns to the plural form, addressing us all in our individual responsibilities. This is a beautiful lesson in balancing group and individual. It is up to each of us individually to make sure that observing the *mitzvot* will be passed to the following generation. If we succeed in doing this, the group will prosper; if not, it will fail. Each one of us counts, each one of us was born for a reason, and each one of us contributes to the greater whole in some way. We may not know the extent of our contribution, but HaShem, who, as it says in Psalm 147:4, names each star, raises the head of each human, counting and valuing us all. May we do likewise as we interact within the concentric rings of our lives!

Shabbat shalom!