

Aside from the incident of the golden calf, there is much to unpack in our parashah, especially in the opening verses. “When you take the sum [literally, when you raise the head] of the children of Israel according to their numbers, let each one give to the Lord an atonement for his soul when they are counted; then there will be no plague among them when they are counted.” (30:12) Why this euphemism for census: *tisa et rosh* – raise the head, which recurs with another verb (*s’u*– lift) in Parashah Bamidbar (Numbers 1:2)? And what does the gift have to do with atonement and disease prevention? It appears that census taking is fraught with danger, and to avert it, a sort of ransom must be paid. Over the centuries these puzzling words have inspired a huge variety of interpretations. In a discussion on census taking in Talmud Tractate Yoma 22b: “Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak said, ‘One who counts a group of Jews violates two negative commandments, as is stated: And the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which shall neither be measured nor counted ...’” [Hosea 2:1]. This contradicts a statement by Rabbi Elazar, which ends the quote with ‘measured.’ To solve this dilemma they conclude, “Here, the second statement refers to a time when the Jewish people fulfill the will of God ... There, the first statement refers to a time when they do not fulfill the will of God; then they will be like the sand of the sea, having a specific number.” Many commentators reference King David’s census in II Samuel 24 and I Chronicles 21, which is taken without Divine commandment, and uses the word *m’nei*, which simply means to count. When David admits his wrongdoing to HaShem, he is given a choice of three years of famine, three months culminating in destruction by his enemies, or three days of pestilence. David chooses pestilence, preferring punishment by the hand of HaShem to that of his fellow humans. Rashi and other medieval sages taught that *ayin hara*, the “evil eye” has power over numbered things. This is derived from the 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment “Do not covet.” Because coveting creates negative energy, it is wise to refrain from ostentatious display. Tractate Ta’anit 8b teaches, “A blessing is found only in an object that is hidden from the eye, not in an item visible to all ... as is stated, ‘The Lord will command His blessing upon you in your barns.’” In other words, the twofold message here is that people should not be counted like mere objects, and because everything is from HaShem, we must not flaunt what we have. Every male over the age of 20, rich and poor alike, is to give a half-shekel, and this “*kesef ha-kipurim* – silver of atonement” is to be used “for the work of the Tent of Meeting.” (30:12-16) This enables the counting of human beings through objects (the half-shekel), and also ensures the dignity of each individual regardless of wealth or position. But why the emphasis on atonement? A possible answer lies in the following verses, in which HaShem describes the form and use of the washstand to be placed at the entrance of the *mishkan*, and issues precise directions for making and using the anointment oil and the incense. The common denominator is purifying through atonement as the prerequisite for approaching HaShem. This applies to humans as well as to offerings and utensils. Instructions began in last week’s parashah with the special garments Aaron and his sons are to wear when they serve in the *mishkan*. They must observe these commandments so as not to “bear iniquity and die.” (28:43) Similarly, they are to wash their hands and feet when they enter the *mishkan* and serve at the altar, so they will not die. A major component of the seven-day rituals of investiture is the act of ritually rendering something “holy,” or fitting to be presented to HaShem. Tractate Menachot 62a explains that the final “wave offering” (29:24) is to “dedicate them [lambs] to Whom the heavens and the earth belong,” and also, “He extends the lambs and brings them back in order to request a halt to harmful winds ... and raises and lowers them to halt harmful dews. ... And one should act similarly with a *lulav* on Sukkot.” The spices for the anointing oil are to be of the highest quality, and this oil is to be used to anoint and sanctify the priests as well as the Tent of Meeting and everything it contains. The oil is to be used exclusively for these purposes, and “any person who compounds anything like it or puts any of it on an alien shall be cut off from his people.” (30:33) This also applies to the aromatics for the incense. These precise instructions indicate that holiness itself is dangerous. The people could not begin to grasp the inherent peril of getting too close to HaShem, not even after the synesthetic experience at Sinai, when the entire mountain was enveloped in holiness and violating this holy space meant instant death. All of these elaborate rituals, from counting people by means of objects to safeguarding the ritual purity of everyone and everything connected with the *mishkan* are a twofold prophylaxis to help us maintain a respectful distance between ourselves and HaShem and to ensure that when we approach HaShem we do so with the holiest of intentions. Aaron’s two eldest sons, Korach and his followers, and many others would perish because they assumed more than was their due. “Lifting the head” implies that we must look up to HaShem, Whose world we can neither imagine nor penetrate, but to Whom we owe everything. The half-shekel reminds us that as partners in our eternal covenant, we must each contribute toward the greater whole. We Jews are small in number, but together we have not only persevered, our accomplishments continue to enrich the world in countless ways. In the words of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z’l, “The only way to get it together is together.”

Shabbat shalom!