

Ki Tissa 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 3/18/17

This week's Torah portion begins with a census. We are told that everyone should bring a half shekel and that's how our People will be counted. The rich cannot bring more and the poor can't give less. Everyone gives a half a shekel. And there is a practical reason for this: If people could bring more than one coin then the count wouldn't be accurate. But there is a spiritual reason for the limit as well: Your monetary wealth is not your true worth as an individual. Regardless of financial standing, every person counts - that's a very strong Torah ideal.

In spite of the fact that this portion does begin with a census, Judaism has always discouraged counting people. It's considered bad luck ever since King David was told not to do so and did it anyway, and brought on a plague. We don't count Jews. Nazis numbered Jews. Jews don't number Jews. To the Nazis a Jew was a "thing," not an individual. To the Jew, every person is a unique individual, a unique creation of Gd. Some people say that there is strength in numbers. Maybe so. But Jews know that spiritual strength is measured in individuality.

So that begs the question: If we don't count Jews, why does the portion begin with a census? I think it's precisely because individuality - the worth of every single individual - is sorely tested right after this counting. You probably remember what comes next: Moshe seems to be slow to come down the mountain and the Jewish People grow impatient. They want a different intermediary between themselves and Gd if Moshe isn't coming back. So they fall back to the Egyptian mode they are so familiar with, and they have Aaron make a sacred cow just like they had seen growing up in Egypt. Makes sense. They fall back on the familiar. And it's not just a few, lots of them get really into it and it's hard not to follow the crowd. So much for individuality... And it's interesting, even Gd treats them all as one collective whole after the Sin of the Golden Calf. Gd tells Moshe he's going to wipe them ALL out and start over with just one guy - Moshe. But of course, we know that's not REALLY going to happen. Gd knows they were not ALL complicit. No one knows our individuality and our individual potential - and theirs - better than Gd! Gd just says this to get a reaction from Moshe; Gd kind of plays him like a violin. Moshe then defends the people and points out just how special these People of his are - as individuals. And Moshe needs to be reminded of this because some are deserving of punishment down below, but others will not only get a second chance, they'll be the very same people who build the Mishkan - Gd's dwelling place on earth. That's going to show that each of them has something special to contribute to making Gd's proper dwelling place on earth. The vast majority of the People will get a second act. And that's what I think connects the first part of the portion - the census - with the second half - the episode of the Golden Calf: Before he comes down the mountain, before he flies into a rage, Moshe needs to be reminded that each person at the base camp is a unique individual with a unique destiny. The census serves to highlight individuality before collective punishment takes root.

But what is "individuality?" Well, in part it is the celebration of your ability to see the world in your own unique way. No one sees the world exactly like you do. You have your own set of ideals and values and opinions - your own causes and convictions - your own likes and dislikes. You know who you are and where you stand. But, at the same time, as this portion reminds us, it is possible to be too set in your ways as well. When Gd threatens to wipe out the People he calls them "stiff-necked." It's clearly NOT a compliment! I take that to mean that many of the calf worshippers could only see directly in front of themselves and were oblivious to all that was going on around them. They were focused on one thing and one thing only, curing the problem of not having a leader then and there. But there was so much else going on at the time - so many other ways of thinking about the exact same situation! But many could not

see it. They were fixated on only one thing- they were a stiff-necked People, passionate in their conviction that Moses would not return.

But it is interesting to me that the very idea that the Torah criticizes - being fixed on one idea, one purpose and one goal, is actually, in many ways, a compliment today. People talk about having a clear sense of purpose - a clear set of goals and a sense of mission -as if that were only one thing and you are lost until you find it... But what if you have more than one passion, more than one clear purpose? What if your passions change, your interests vary, and you move from one opinion to the next? What if you are passionate about something today, but that passion and purpose wanes in a year or two?

Think about it this way: With college and the job market so competitive today, we push kids to know what they want to do with their lives earlier and earlier on. "What do you want to do when you grow up?" You gotta know! Really, we would not advise a young applicant to say to a college recruiter, "I'd like to bounce around from job to job, from field to field, depending on what interests me at the time." No!

But you know what? I admire that! It's not me. I've wanted to be a Rabbi since I was 5 years old. I always had this one vision - and it's all I know. But I greatly admire people who can move around from interest to interest and even career to career. I think people like that believe they have not just one purpose, not just one potential, but lots of them. And they are willing to take risks to actualize dormant potential that only they can see in themselves. It's the opposite of being "stiff-necked." Others may take that as a lack of conviction or purpose, but I see it as a dynamic model for personal growth.

And I highlight this especially now, in a time when many people are drawn to thinking in black and white - right and wrong. You've got to know what you believe and be true to your purpose. We are taught we should have a purpose driven life. But there are people in the world who see life less in terms of single-minded purpose, and more as endless opportunities to unleash personal potential. There is even a word for these kinds of people who move from career to career, from interest to interest, passion to passion, continually redefining their sense of purpose. Psychologists call them "Multi-potentialists." Multi-potentialists are folks for whom there is always a second act no matter what's gone on in the past. We all know people like this and I like to learn from them. Multi-potentialists know how to synthesize various aspects of their lives and experiences since they have had lots of interests and experiences. They are less afraid to try new things or entertain new and competing thoughts. Multi-potentialists are quick learners. When they experience something new they go all in. They are not afraid of being beginners again, in fact they are used to it. And they can take what they have learned in one arena and take it to the next. And what I admire most about people who have multi-purpose lives, about people whose passions continue to evolve, picking up some and discarding others, is their unique ability to be adaptable. I am not talking about being devoid of a moral compass. I'm talking about the ability to be an individual who is always moving forward, integrating new ideas, following new passions or interests, pushing beyond what's always been because of a genuine curiosity of what could be.

The reason we don't count Jews is because each of us is unique; each of us has unique gifts that are yet to be discovered; each of us has unique potential. It's just too easy to be stiff-necked, too easy to become complacent and set in our ways... Our evolving individuality is our strength, and following through on it is a measure of our character and of our courage. In a life of ever-increasing potential, of passions yet to be found, the best is always yet to come.