

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

KI TISA

G-d said to Moshe: When you take a census of the Israelites... everyone shall give a half-shekel... the rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less... to atone for your souls (30:11-16).

As I write this, Gateshead Yeshiva is approaching five generations of its alumni for £4 million pounds sterling towards ensuring its continuity. Glad to help, but making a difference with a sum of that magnitude is above my pay scale. I gave, though wondering what difference it might make. Yet a few seconds later a cheery message arrived with the receipt telling me that my donation was doubled and partially redoubled by third parties.

"When you take a census of the Israelites... everyone shall give a half-shekel." By the monetary values of the time, half a shekel is small enough for people of limited means to give, though not small enough that they wouldn't miss it. Still scope for thinking: "What difference will it make?"

My late teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l, explains that our practice of using a pasuk of 10 words instead of numbers when counting people for a minyan shows that our strength as

Am Yisrael does not lie in numbers, in how many people we are. KI ATEM HA-M'AT MIKOL HA-AMIM - you are the least numerous of all people (D'varim 7:7). I might add geographically: on the world map, Israel is so tiny and miniscule that it takes a dot and a symbol to represent it. Otherwise it would hardly be seen at all.

Our strength is KI AM KADOSH ATA LASHEM ELOKECHA - For you are a holy people to G-d (14:2). The people whose collective existence and purpose is a pilot operation to ultimately bring humanity to a destiny of harmony with the Creator and with other people. Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov connected as individuals, which five generations later produced their descendants, the whole nation of Am Yisrael enthusiastically accepting this challenge with NA'ASEH V'NISHMA: we will obey and we will learn.

Central to our holy traditions is giving. That is fundamental to our mindset, not merely an altruistic action of voluntarily parting with a piece of wealth for a good cause. It is not just about giving to the recipient. It is about giving to the giver. It belongs to the giver's identity. The act of giving makes you feel part of something, especially as I found with the Gateshead Yeshiva fund raising drive, when other people participate

pro-rata to your input. And as Rabbi Sacks put it, half a shekel, not a whole shekel. We contribute our half, convinced that others will join us, and that they do so inspired by what we have started.

We may conclude by going one step deeper and one step wider. Keeping the mitzvot as a community, as exemplified by the MACHATZIT HASHEKEL, it lies at the very core of who we are. Not how populous we are compared to other peoples and societies. It is an unfortunate reality that Am Yisrael has its delinquents, but as long as we subscribe to the Torah, our community does not give their behaviour any support or approval. Which explains why we appeal to G-d to view our kiyum mitzvot exemplified by the machazit hashekel as atonements for our souls: that He may graciously overlook any temporary shortcomings as our behaviours affirm our core Torah values as a community. 🌿📖