

Pinchas

After the plague that had killed thousands of Jews as a result of their relationships with the Midianites, God commands Moses and Elazar, the son of Aharon to take a new census of the Jewish people. Statistical measurements often have the effect of turning each human being into an unknown, faceless number. As with any census, a person included could be forgiven for feeling like another statistic. That feeling is an affront to our basic human needs of self-value and the sense of unique individuality.

Therefore, when God commands the census He says, 'Lift up the heads of the entire community of the children of Israel'. God did not want to simply number each person. By commanding Moses and Elazar to lift up the heads of entire people, the census was meant to engender a feeling within each Jew of their importance by helping each person to recognise that through their unique qualities and talents, they play a critical role as part of the Jewish people.

Moses was so sensitive to the importance of knowing the needs of each individual, that when it came for Moses to pass on the mantle of leadership, he petitions God as 'God of the spirits of all flesh'. Rashi, the famous 11th Century French commentator explains that this refers to God's unique knowledge of every creation and that every human being has their own inimitable strengths, weaknesses and needs. One of the most important character traits of good leadership is not necessarily to make rousing speeches. After all, we learn from the very beginning that Moses found it hard to speak in public, so much so that he asked God to appoint his brother Aharon to speak to Pharaoh for him. However, what is critical is a leader's ability to recognise the individual qualities and needs of those whom he leads.

However, there must also be a reciprocal understanding amongst those who are led to recognise the distinctive qualities they possess. As part of the Jewish people, each one of us could feel lost among the many others in our community. We could be tempted to remain in the shadows concealing our talents. But in reality, we all have an important role to play, and we are being unfair to ourselves and our community if we withhold the gifts, we have been given by God from benefiting others. God, who is the God of the spirits of all flesh, certainly knows just how special we are.

When we read the command to Moses and Elazar to lift up the heads of the entire Jewish people, we must also hear that command ourselves. We must lift up our heads so that we do not remain as a mere statistic but transform ourselves to become a vital component of our community through sharing our unique talents and skills for the benefit of our own communities and the entire Jewish people.

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