

"A CENSUS THAT MAKES SENSE"

There is a disturbing idea apparently suggested by a verse in the special reading of Shekalim. We are commanded to take a census of the people, whereby every adult male would contribute a half-shekel, neither more nor less. Then the Torah adds the words ve'lo yihyeh ba-hem negef -- and there shall be no plague amongst them. The usual interpretation of this verse is that plague or punishment mysteriously follows upon the act of counting, and that the giving of the half-shekel will avoid that negef or plague.

Is this really so? Im kabbalah hi, nekabel -- if it is indeed an authentic part of our sacred tradition, we shall accept it even without understanding it. But it is a troubling thought, and does not commend itself to the modern mind, even if such mind is sympathetically predisposed to Judaism.

Fortunately, however, there are alternative explanations. I should like to recommend to you three interpretations which are not only palatable, but reveal the inner beauty and sublimity of the Torah's commandment.

The first of these is given to us by the Zohar. We are told that there will be no plague, be'gin de birkhata lo sharya be'minyana; kevan d'istalak birkhata, sitra ahra sharya aleih -- because blessing does not rest upon that which is counted, and once blessing vanishes, then only evil can take its place.

In other words, whether there will be ^ebrakhah or negef, blessing or plague, depends upon counting: if you count, there is plague; if you do not count, there is blessing.

What does that mean? I believe it means that when we emphasize minyan, when we are concerned only with quantity, when we are obsessed with numbers -- then there must be negef, plague, there can be no berakhah. The index of blessing is substance and quality and content, not size and quantity and number.

It is important to recall this elementary truism which is often neglected in our times. The leaders of our government are said to use polls to determine policy. Now, it is good to test the educative function of leadership by means of public opinion polls, and so to determine its success. But opinion does not change facts. The question of Viet-Nam, the anti-poverty drive, and other legislation, is a matter of wisdom and justice, and the ultimate questions should not be determined by a consensus.

The character of the Jewish community transcends the numbers of observant people. The community of Israel as such has obligations to live up to its timeless ideals even if the majority of its members have abandoned them. The spiritual personality and the destiny of the State of Israel cannot and ought not be determined solely by the number of votes the religious parties have gained.

Jewish communities in the United States in recent years have spent money on "self-study" programs whereby sociologists and statisticians are engaged to undertake an analysis of the community and prepare tables of statistics. This may be important for many purposes, but unfortunately it has become a substitute for action in perpetuating Judaism itself. Jewish education and culture are often shunted aside by Welfare Fund allocations committees in favor of the preparation of statistics. We have now the negef, the plague, of

"Sociological Judaism" whereby tables and charts replace textbooks and children.

As a people we have never been distinguished by numbers. As G-d told us through Moses, ki atem ha-me'at mi-kol ha-amim -- you are the smallest amongst the people. Our berakhah, our blessing, will come when we concern ourselves with the substance of our Jewishness, and give up more fascination with numbers.

A second interpretation is offered to us by Ibn Ezra. He tells us that the Torah means that negef will come only when individuals fail to give each his half-shekel. It does not mean that counting is an evil, and that the shekel removes the curse. Rather, it is a mitzvah to give and to give the right amount; if this mitzvah is not followed, then a negef will appear.

A slight modification makes of this an even more beautiful interpretation. Rabbi Mosheh Hefetz adds that the word negef is related to, and in this case means, the Hebrew word negifah -- collision, conflict, controversy. Thus, each Jew, whether rich or poor, was told to give the same amount, for if this were not set by the Torah as a standard amount, people would involve themselves in all kinds of conflict, would display arrogance and enmity, and there would result a social breakdown, a negef or negifah! The principle that emerges from this, is that when we shirk our duty and shift our responsibility to others, when we fail in our own individual obligations and therefore cause burdens to be placed upon others unfairly, then there will result negef: enmity, hatred, and controversy.

This holds true not only for financial obligations, the giving of

the half-shekel, but also for one's service, time, and personal involvement. Thus, for instance, every member of the synagogue desires that the synagogue maintain a regular minyan at all times, especially when he may need it. Yet, when a person of this kind is unwilling to give of his own time regularly to the minyan, he shirks his responsibility. The result can only be -- negef, unhappiness and dissatisfaction in the community at large. The same holds true for Jewish education. All of us want the synagogue to be a center for education. Yet we must remember that if we do not want negef, then we too must be educated; education was not meant only for children and adult non-members. In the same manner must we understand our desires for the economic and spiritual health of the State of Israel -- if we participate and do all we can to advance it, then we will be contributing towards the realization of our cherished goals; otherwise, there must be negef, social plagues.

Hence we learn that we must all contribute equally in effort if not in money, we must all participate in the great communal endeavors of our people. Then there will be no negef; then there will be communal harmony and social peace.

The late Rabbi Amiel of Tel Aviv has given us the third interpretation. How, after all, he asks, does one count Jews? Once upon a time, one could do that by counting the people who came to the daily minyan or at least to the services on Shabbat. One could count the kosher butcher stores and their customers, or the stores closed on Main Street on Shabbat. In a weaker community such as ours, we count the number of children absent from Public Schools on Rosh

Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But in a very highly assimilated community, the way to count Jews is by -- death! It happens, and it happens often as it recently did, that we hardly know a man is Jewish by the way he lives, and can tell it only when we read his obituary. Many people are buried Jewish who never lived Jewishly. Hence, ve'lo yiheyh ba-hem negef is not the Torah's warning, but its plea. Try to count as Jews in life, and in a living manner, in the way of life you conduct, not through plague and death and disaster.

Unfortunately, it happens today too: there are people who know they are Jews only when they confront the plague of anti-Semitism. There are youngsters who realize their heritage only when they are excluded from a fraternity or later from a country club; and with the increasing liberalization of these groups, some people indeed never learn that they are Jewish. More recently, with the fashionableness of "dialogues" with Christians, there are a number of Jews who have begun to understand themselves only by contrast with the prevailing faith. They seem to forget that Judaism has its own authentic content, that fa transcends mere contrast with other faiths. They act as if it is good enough to be a Jew by not accepting certain non-Jewish beliefs, and that it is not necessary to accept the proper ones to begin with. The same phenomenon was noticed in Israel during the "Who is a Jew?" controversy, when a number of people began to realize that they had defined their Jewishness not in a positive manner, but merely by the fact that they were not "goyim!" .

Ve'lo yiheyh ba-hem negef. It is a plague when we number Jews

only by how they die, or how they react to the poison of anti-Semitism, or by the fact that they are not non-Jews.

Kiatisa^s et rosh benei yisrael -- Jewishness must be "a lifting of the head," it must be elevating and uplifting. The census that makes sense is only the positive assertion of one's Jewishness.

To summarize, therefore, we found three interpretations of the plague that follows upon counting. The Zohar interprets it as meaning the assertion of quality over quantity. Ibn Ezra and Rabbi Mosheh Hefetz tell us that it refers to the social disruption attendant upon the shirking of responsibility. And Rabbi Amiel tells us that the road to Jewishness must not be through negef, it must not be negative, inspired by death and disaster and hatred.

The half-shekel that was given as part of the census, is called by the Torah kofer nefesh, it is redemptive. Hence, taught the great Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Hanokh Henekh of Alexander, we are lead to a remarkable insight. The word shekel is numerically equivalent to the word nefesh -- 430. This means that even if a man gave his half-shekel, he has not finished his task. He must complete it with his nefesh, he must complement his deed with his heart and his soul.

The real Jew, one who really counts, one whose census makes sense, is the one who gives, not only his shekel, but also his nefesh.

Then, there will be no negef -- only berakhah, only blessing.