

Count Me In

written by Yossi Katz
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The three most frightening letters in the English language are I-R-S. It's "that time of the year" again. The tax-return strategy I've heard whispered about most often is: "Keep out of trouble, don't raise any red flags, and try to blend in."

What does this have to do with our *parashah*? Rashi explains that if the Jewish people need to be counted, the best way to go about it is to have each Jew donate a half-shekel, and tally up the coins. Counting the Jews directly can be calamitous, because singling out individual Jews risks subjugating them to the evil eye. God therefore commanded the Jews to be counted via the half-shekel (see Rashi on Exodus 30:12).

If we know that counting the Jews is a bad idea, why bother? If Jewish unity is such a great, protective force, why not

stick together and keep out of trouble? The answer is that inasmuch as the Jewish people are one, every Jew is unique. Every Jew counts! We are all given individual tasks in this world. (These are often represented by the things we struggle with; we were brought to this world specifically to improve in these areas.)

This is why each of us has our own name. A Jewish name alludes to the areas in which we have the potential to excel. According to the Arizal, the name that parents give their child in this world is the name by which God in the upper worlds calls that child's soul (see *Sha'ar HaGilgulim*, Introduction #23).

One of the greatest spiritual dangers we face is when we compare ourselves to others. Although we're taught to see the good in our friends, and to emulate their good behavior, we also have to realize that we're not them! It's great to be inspired by others, but that inspiration should be used to encourage us to deal with our own challenges, not to copy others.

At their source, all Jews are aflame in their desire for Godliness. The reason we struggle to connect to God is not because of lack of interest, but because we want too much to connect. We often think, "If I can't achieve such and such a level, or do a mitzvah in a certain perfect kind of way, why bother?" Acknowledging that we each have a unique mission and purpose, and that this is specifically why we can't do things perfectly, we can finally begin to serve and connect to God.

In the Mishkan (and later, the Beit Hamikdash), it was possible for each Jew to gather together as one but to remain their unique selves. The Mishnah records a wondrous event that regularly took place in the Beit Hamikdash. Although the Jews stood tightly pressed together, they were able to bow down with ample space between them (*Avot* 5:5). Thus, each person could recite his own confession without his friend hearing it

(Vayikra Rabbah 10:9).

This is why the Jews were commanded to count themselves using half-shekel coins, which were donated for the upkeep of the Mishkan. A “shekel” can be translated as a “measure.” Yes, we stand together as one Jewish people, but our greatness can never be counted unless we each take full measure of our own unique qualities and mission.

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Tefillat Minchah 7:14

A Gutn Shabbos! Shabbat Shalom!