“Lifting the Head”

D’var Torah for Erev Shabbat *B’midbar*, May 22, 2020

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The late Morris Herson was chair of the board when Benjie and I first came to Bet Am Shalom in 1989. He was a dear man and a special friend. He took me aside in my first month and told me that among the challenges of leading this congregation was that there were lots of chiefs and very few Indians.

But that turned out to be one of its greatest strengths, as Morris well knew. Whatever the actual number count of members we had at any given time, we always had more than our share of people who were eager to step up and make a difference. That’s why our website looks as if we’re a congregation twice our actual size. Size does matter, but only the size of the population willing to take on the holy tasks of a holy community.

The Israelites in the wilderness, the *midbar*, were a ragtag group early on in their trek from Egypt and the Sea to the Mount of Revelation. All followers, no leaders - save for Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. All slaves in their own minds. All fearful in their hearts. All eager not to count.

God tells Moses and Aaron to count the people, and then to organize them tribe by tribe, flag by flag, task by holy task. By counting them, God hopes to give them a sense of significance where up to now they had none. To matter. To make a difference.

The commandment at the beginning of our parashah means “take a census,” but the literal words are *s’u et rosh*, “lift the head” of every Israelite. Yes, it simply means to count heads, but it might also mean much more.

Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, the 16th-17th century teacher who wrote the *Sh’ney Luchot Ha-B’rit*, the “two tablets of the covenant,” known by the acronym *Sh’LaH*, picks up on this idea that God is asking for more than a mere head count.

He suggests that what God is asking Moses and Aaron to do is to make every last Israelite feel like a *rosh*, like the “head” of something important. The idea is that by being called *rosh*, each person might recognize his or her own unique personhood, or *ishiut*.

And if so, then perhaps each individual might realize his or her additional responsibility for all of their actions. For *all* of their actions - as if for the first time their actions mattered beyond anything they could have ever imagined before.

As if they now had an important place in the total scheme of things. As if their “number” in the census made them not infinitesimally small, but infinitesimally significant. Not a cipher, but a *rosh*, a “head” or “leader” of their community and their world. And at the very least, a leader of their own lives.

Says the ShLaH, “now the Israelites would realize that by having their heads uplifted, their actions for good or evil will have influence.” *Hashpa’ah al ha’ra v’al hatov.* Good and evil are in their hands, not in the hands of some authority on high.

Being counted means receiving ultimate dignity, but it also means not being able to hide. It means having the terrifying privilege of responsibility, of mattering, of influencing for good or evil.

In the end, that responsibility, that “*rosh-*ness,” might be what our people received at Sinai. Not “the Torah,” but a unique number, a name, a task, an assignment, a place in the Torah’s ledger of souls called upon to be holy, and to model holiness for the generations yet to come.