

Ki Tisa Rabbi David Mahler

Our *parsha* is bookended by two stories that are seemingly unrelated yet both resonate in a deep, meaningful and timely way as culturally, we are living in a very scary time.

Moshe Rabbeinu is commanded to take a census of *Bnei Yisrael* to determine their population as they continue their trek towards *Eretz Yisrael*. The means through which Moshe is to count the nation is through the use of the half-shekel. He is forbidden from counting them directly. Additionally, the wording of the mandate to count is awkward. *Hashem* doesn't utilize the common verb "*moneh*" in the *pasuk*, but rather "*tisa*" (30:12), literally, to lift. Why the switch? What is it meant to teach?

The answer is simple, while at the same time scintillating.

We often count to know how many we have. We count towards a large sum. The total number is the goal. In this case, we don't count normally because doing so would minimize each person. It would give off the impression that you are only one of the sum-total. That is not lifting another person, but rather lowering them.

Secondly, as we know too well from Jewish history, limiting a person to a number, while stripping them of their name, is dehumanizing. Judaism believes in building others, not in tearing them down. Counting another should be a "*ki tisa*", an uplifting experience. It should be an experience of you matter, you are impactful, you have a unique destiny carefully designed by *Hashem*.

Therefore, counting in Judaism straddles a tenuous line.

We are living through an epidemic of ideas. Peoples' ideas and words are being deleted and muted. "Cancel Culture" is not a Jewish ideology. It is anathema to our people's very essence. We are a people prone to debate and discourse. We chew on and massage ideas to enlighten, enliven and inspire. And when we over-reach in our censorship of articles, books, posts and ideas, we are acting in a very un-Jewish way.

I am not pretentious enough to know where that nebulous line lies, but I feel that our country has crossed it.

On a more serious note, when you delete one's opinions, you risk deleting them. When you censor one's ideas, you risk censoring them. We discuss and debate ideas but always respect people. That is our history – to debate with dignity.

Each person must be counted in a way that they are lifted. *Hashem* uses the word “*tisa*” to teach that we must always be wary of never canceling a person.

One of the most inspiring *gemaras* for me is found in *Masechet Yevamos* (14b). The *gemara* teaches that *Beis Hillel* and *Beis Shammai* argued for three years, over hundreds of issues, until the *bas kol* (heavenly voice) announced that the *halacha* will side with *Beis Hillel*. Then the *gemara* teaches that despite their many disagreements and arguments, their families married each other.

The *Talmud* tells us that despite their differences, the schools of *Hillel* and *Shammai* created one community. The students of each, and their children, “intermarried” freely with the sons and daughters of the other side. They lived with mutual respect and reverence.

As wonderful as this sounds, the *gemara* stresses how truly remarkable it really was. The *gemara* highlights the fact that the two schools did not simply argue regarding the laws of *sukkah*, *shabbos* and *berachos*. Their dissension infiltrated into the world of purity and divorce, marriage and conversion. The rulings of these topics impact one’s personal and religious status. They “intermarried” despite disagreeing about issues of Who is a Jew, or Is she still an *agunah*?

The community of *Beis Hillel* and *Beis Shammai* looks very different than ours.

The second half of the *parsha* discusses the tragic sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe’s smashing of the tablets, the *teshuva* of *Bnei Yisrael* and Moshe’s crucial role in our national recovery from sin.

Whatever happened to the broken tablets? Where are they? Has anyone found them?

The *gemara* (*Bava Basra* 14) teaches that both the second set of tablets as well as the broken tablets were placed in the holy ark. They are both holy. They are both put in a special place.

One lesson must be that imperfection is a part of life. We are who we are because of the solid, whole and complete parts of our lives. In some areas of life, we cruise and there is a sense of flow, pace and accomplishment. However, in other areas, we are a bit shattered or broken, a bit damaged or bruised. But those parts of us animate who we are as well. We, each and every one of us, are an ark - housing both sets of tablets.

A second aspect of “Cancel Culture” seeks to remove and eliminate the past, pretending as if it never occurred. That is simply not true and hinders real growth. We can only grow and improve when we confront past mistakes and indiscretions. I am who I am due to my successes and failures, my accomplishments and defeats. The broken *luchos* weren’t discarded. They were purposefully put into the *Aron*. Some of my missteps have paralyzed while others have animated. To discard or erase them would be insincere and counterproductive.

Mochek, erasing, is one of the 39 *melachos* used in the construction of the *mishkan*. But so is its opposite – *kosev*, writing.

May we continue to write the story of our lives by impacting others positively through building and repairing – by lifting others up. And may every chapter be filled with lessons learned from every experience of our lives.

Good Shabbos