

D'var Torah: Parashat Ki Tisa

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Among the many subjects covered in this Parsha is the declaration of a census. God tells Moses to take a census of everyone and that every person must pay a 'ransom', which is a half a shekel if you are over 20 years old. The money will go to the service of the Tent of Meeting. The Torah says it will also be a ransom to keep a plague from happening. The question I want to address is: what impact did the census have on the Israelites?

In the Bible, the taking of a census is sometimes inferred to be negative and a source of fear for the people. Some of the commentaries state that the census meant that people were going to war and/or going to be taxed more. It was not perceived by the Israelites as positive. The commentary says "that counting was usually done before a war or before a new tax." The text even says that God orders the census and tells Moses to collect money from everyone counted. They are being asked for money, a tax to support the Tent of Meeting. And we know they will have to fight when they enter the land.

By asking for the same amount from everyone, rich or poor, he might have been displaying disregard for individual circumstances. They were slaves after-all, it's not like they had much, if any, money. The Torah also uses the words "ransom" and "atone-ment" and these words are not usually the ones you hear concerning people caring

about you. So, there are definite arguments that reflect that the census had a negative impact on the Israelites.

There is another side to the argument. Maybe the census meant that God and Moses cared about their people. After all, 'Why count people to send them off to go die?', I thought. The census could have been a way for God to show he cared. He wanted to know how many people were under his charge, his responsibility. I was also thinking that God might have been giving the Israelites an opportunity to feel good by atoning for their sins by paying a tax. God asked for each Israelite to give the same amount of money, whatever their circumstances, this could demonstrate that each person had the same value to him.

I see both sides because we are shown that Moses cares for the people when he asks God to lead them. Why would he count the people only to do bad things with that information? I believe Moses took a census because he cared about the people and wanted to simply know how many people were with him. Maybe he wanted to know how many people were there to better take care of them, provide them resources, medicine, and food. Knowing who is in your group, kids, elderly, sick, poor, disabled, helps you know what they need to thrive.

However, Moses himself tells the people when they are worshiping the golden calf, that all loyal to him join him, and then proceeds to tell the Levites to kill many of the others. So, he cared about all who were loyal to him, but then killed those that were not. This is certainly troubling. but maybe Moses was trying to save the rest of the Israelite people, when God was so angry that he wanted to abandon them all.

Additionally, the commentary says that “The donation will assure the forgiveness of all the sins for the person enrolled in the census.” This raises an interesting idea; I thought that the donation was needed to buy things. But, since the Israelites were wandering across the desert waiting for God to tell them what to do, they didn’t have anything to spend the money on anyway. So, I think that the theory that says Moses took the money to atone for their sins is the most plausible because if they are collecting money from the census, the census can’t purely be for information. The money will now support the Tent of Meeting.

There is still the idea that they were counted for war, like they still do today when drafts are implemented. The Israelite people will have to face and fight against enemies in the desert and when they reach the land. So this is a plausible reason though it is not the reason given in for this census. Back then I think that the most plausible reason would be to pay for their sins, as Moses didn’t have any clear signs of being a greedy man and he wouldn’t make them pay if he just wanted to know how many people there were. I agree with the commentators that argue that the census was taken so the people could atone for and pay for their sins.

The topic of the census is important to me because it showed that God and Moses cared about their people. This matters to me because it then shows that God cares about every one of us. The census provided useful information for leaders to govern their people. An example of this today is the 2020 census. We are all being counted, so the government knows who is under their care and responsibility. This way they can identify resources that we, the people, need. But the draft and taxes are also based on this counting. The census can also be a source of fear for some still today.

Immigrants in our country might be afraid of being deported or at risk. On the other hand however, when we take attendance in school, the teachers then know who is their responsibility for the day. With this information, they can keep their students safe, provide food, and any other services they require. But, they can also test those students that are present and the students then have a responsibility to be upstanding students. Upon reflection, it seems the census had a big impact on the Israelites, as well as the census's that happen to us today. It created more taxes and the chance to go to war, but it also provided Moses with valuable information to support and care for the Israelites.