

Shabbat Parashat Ki Tissa “We Are All Equal in the Eyes of the Lord”

This week's *parasha* contains one of the most well-known and difficult events in the Torah narrative: the making and worshipping of the Golden Calf. As important as this story is to understanding the Israelites' experience and state of mind after having come out of slavery, this story is not the most important and meaningful part of this week's *parasha*. At the very beginning of the portion, God commands Moses to take another census of the Children of Israel. The counting would occur by means of the collection of half-shekel coins from each adult male. However, in the specifics of God's command to Moses, we find the following instruction: “the wealthy shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than the one-half shekel gift to the Lord.” (Exodus 30:15) This qualification imparts an important value to the Israelite community at that time and to our Jewish community of today.

The half-shekel gift to God served a very particular purpose. Each half-shekel represented one adult-aged male in the community. To give more would represent an individual attempting to “be more” than others. Giving less would mean that an individual was not acting as a fully participating member of the community. By requiring each person to contribute an equal amount, God is leveling the playing field for each and every adult. As the popular idiom suggests, “we are all equal in the eyes of the Lord.” God and Judaism do not judge or evaluate us based on the levels of our wealth, our career successes, or the amount of possessions that we are able to acquire and accumulate. We are all seen as individual human souls, put on earth for the purpose of making the world into a better place than what we found it, for spreading the message of love, respect, and peace among peoples, and for elevating the living of our lives to the holiness that brings us in closer relationship with God. These purposes are possible for each and every person with equal opportunity.

Even though the word “egalitarianism” is most immediately associated with women's participation in synagogue ritual life becoming equal to that of men, the Torah is teaching us about a much broader and far-reaching concept of equality. Do not be mistaken, I am not suggesting that this *parasha* can serve as a source for the “correctness” of the concept of male-female egalitarianism in synagogue life. In fact, the laws of the half-shekel did not apply to or mention women at all. The text does, however, remind us of the example that God sets for us to follow: to see each other as equals, without judgment or preconception. At our essence, each and every one of us is a human being, with the same elementary ingredients and systematic make-up. If we were all able to live our lives with this value as an influence in our daily living, think about how different a place our world could be!

Shabbat Shalom!