

THE COMMITMENT TO HUMAN RIGHTS

A commentary on *Parashat Ki Tissa*
By Rabbi Daniel Smith

Judaism does not speak so much about human “rights” but speaks more about human “duties.” *Mitzvot* are the other side of the coin of human rights, because one person’s human rights are everyone else’s human responsibilities. Human rights are more than well-meaning wishes. They become actualized through our commitment, personally and financially.

Parashat Ki Tissa begins with a census counting all the men of Israel aged twenty and over. But the people are not counted directly. Instead, each person is commanded to make an offering of half a shekel. The rich may not give more, and the poor may not give less. Then the shekels are counted. The tradition is that we do not number people directly because every person is a unique individual. We know the evil of societies that tried to turn people into mere numbers.

Traditionally these verses are read on *Shabbat Shekalim*, which inaugurated the annual fund-raising drive for the temple and for religious institutions in Israel. In more recent times, these verses have been used to remind us to make donations to other Jewish institutions.

Giving to the community, supporting synagogues, schools and charities is a normative aspect of Jewish experience. The rabbis saw the act of giving as character building. They tried to create a society where people felt it natural to give and to care for others. Judaism commands that we pay taxes and give charity as part of our social duty, in order to enable all people to enjoy their human rights.

Ensuring the right to education means we must train teachers, build schools and support libraries. The right to justice means appointing judges, courts and

police officers. The right to health-care means training nurses and doctors, and maintaining hospitals. It should be pointed out that the original *Ki Tissa* biblical census was probably for military purposes. Though Judaism sees war as a terrible last resort, Judaism is not a pacifist religion. Until the messianic age of peace arrives, the human right to freedom and security may mean maintaining a military defence capability.

The rabbis derived spiritual lessons based on this *Parasha*. Every Israelite was obliged to give a contribution of half a shekel. Unlike most biblical taxes, this poll-tax was the same for everyone. Other Biblical taxes were linked to how much a person could afford to give. For example, the tithe was ten percent of income, which obviously meant the rich gave more than the poor. The rich and the landowners had further extra taxes, such as leaving the corners of their fields for the poor and the stranger, and leaving the gleanings of their orchards, fields and vineyards for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. The very poor were exempt from paying most taxes. But in this half-shekel contribution everybody was asked to give the same equal amount, because every person had a part to play in maintaining a home for the Divine Presence and for the Jewish people. On a spiritual level everyone counts in the community.

But why should it be a **half** shekel that everyone gives, and not a **whole** shekel? Perhaps it is to teach us that no one is whole and complete on their own. We need others so that we can become complete individuals, and we need good relationships with others to be fully ourselves.

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