



Parashat Ki Tissa
Hashem and Equity

by J Simone Posner on Friday March 13, 2009

17 Adar 5769

Exodus 30:11-34:45

This week's *parsha* covers a wide range of juicy topics (too many for one drash). There are the continued themes of items needed for the *Ohel* or "tent of meeting" that would eventually become our "temple". There is a point of discussion about who shall do the work to construct the items. There are reminders about keeping Shabbat. There is the story of *Hashem's* first version of the law whose tablets were smashed by Moses because the Israelites erected a golden calf. There is the story of the second set of tablets; and finally the story of Moses' personal relationship with Hashem. All very interesting stuff but I'd like to write about something else.

"Ki Tissa et-rosh B'nai Yisrael..." (Exodus 30:12) 'When thou takest the sum of the children of Israel...'

Ki Tissa begins with *Hashem's* command for Moses to take a census of the people...all of them, without reference to gender. Each man over the age of 20 is then required to pay a "ransom" for themselves. Each man, both rich and poor alike, had to pay no more and no less than a half-shekel as "atonement money" for their sins. The money went to the service of the *Ohel*.

For those of LGBTQI history and background, this might seem the least likely of things to talk about, since, while all may be counted, only able-bodied men are required to pay the ransom. Let me submit to you that the Torah is the law and particularly this *parsha* speaks in detail about the law. Finding that spiritual message and path all while trying to bring the Judaic life into harmony with the LGBTQI background had me considering the question of equity under Hashem's law. Does G-d care about equality?

Ki Tissa speaks about the elevation of Levites and separation of Kohenim (priests) through the line of Aaron. I submit that in appropriating power in this way made this hierarchy a false higher-power and took the attention off of *Hashem*. Thus, a golden calf was built.

So, back to the census and the small collection. Israel's numbers in those days were just over 600,000 *gevarim* or "able bodied". What constituted a *gevarim* for this census? Who was



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counted? Who was NOT counted? Were there people who expressed gender differently back then? Were these persons counted? Were trans-women considered able-bodied men? Were trans-men counted among the women? Torah doesn't speak with their voices, so I have to look at the collection G-d required to find traces of equity.

Previously in "Terumah" (Exodus 25) the Israelites were asked to make a contribution suggested by their hearts. It could be red yarn or lapis lazuli or precious metal or goats hair and not in any specified amounts or requirements by caste. This donation was used to build the Ohel and its contents.

In verse 15, the commandment specifies that the half shekel should be paid by rich and poor alike. This "half-shekel" offering for atonement is more on a spiritual plane and not determined by one's wealth. It is mentioned in this *parsha* that a *shekel* is 20 *gerahs* and the half would be 10 *gerahs*. According to ancient weights and measures 1 *gerah* = .41667 grams and therefore 10 *gerahs* (or a half-shekel).

If we use silver as a measure of monetary equivalence, (a whopping \$14 USD for an ounce- or 28.35 grams) that would mean the price of salvation (even with the outrageous price of precious metals during our present economic crisis) is about \$2.00 USD. This is a price that even the most financially strapped LGBTQI person could afford even if they couldn't afford their rent, clothes, medicines, food or other basic necessities.

Many point to this book to proclaim the greatness of Moses, of the Levites (who by the way go on a killing spree in Exodus 32:26-29 if you are into blood and gore) the Kohanim who in spite of their wisdom and ceremonies and vestments still somehow preside over the forging of a golden calf and then fudge it when retelling the tale to Moses.

This *parasha* tells me in the most unequivocal way, that it is not *Hashem* that is ever in error, but humankind. *Hashem* asks for things from all people and usually the same things in the same way. This is true equity under the law. It is humankind who seeks to separate and make distinctions perhaps because of a most un-divine way of judging people, places, things and scenarios that most require *Hashem's* implanted "divine spark".

For many years the Trans community had a terrible problem with such a caste system where Drag Queens would fight MTF Transsexuals and everyone fought against Transvestites and there was no unanimity among even the Transsexuals who had no common-ground between the MTF and FTM factions. And lets not forget MTF's who would argue ceaselessly among themselves about which surgical intervention/method/practitioner was the best. This all happened before the word "Transgender" was in common use. That was yet another story.



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Still not sure about equity under *Hashem's* law or how unity under *Hashem's* law will deliver us? Lets take a look at Exodus 31. Verse 12. It begins with reminding the Israelites about their covenant and how it is important to keep *Shabbat* because *Hashem* rested on day seven. How can I work on Shabbat if Hashem didn't? Do I think I'm better than *Hashem*? Humility before *Hashem* is the manifestation of equity under the law. For those who go to synagogue regularly verses 16 and 17 form the familiar *V'shamru* heard in many Shabbat services everywhere:

The Israelite people shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time: it shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and was refreshed. Exodus 31:16-17

About 20 years ago, there was a story I heard about a transwoman who tried to get religious permission from a rabbi to change gender, and live and function and a woman within the community. This rabbi told her that she was an abomination. She said it was a matter of *pikuah nefesh* (the rule that says a law can be broken to save a life) and the rabbi (A Cohen by the way) told her that even under the Noahide laws, it wouldn't pass and that she would be better off killing herself. As she walked out of his office, she asked one final question: since this religion had now utterly rejected her, could she now disown and disavow herself of its barbarism? The Rabbi told her she was not excused; not excused from keeping kosher and not excused from keeping Shabbat. This seeming slap in the face put the focus back on *Hashem* and gave that woman just enough space to live and function as a Jew today.

If you feel someone out there is struggling with spirituality and religion tell them to try to keep Shabbat and point them to the text of the *V'Shamru*.

One final thing about the census. This is just another way of saying "stand up and be counted." There is a spiritual message, too, I think. Earlier in the week we hear the reading of the *Megillah*. In Esther 4:12 Mordechai tells Esther that she must risk death and come out about her Jewishness to save the lives of many others. I think this resonates exactly with the census and "counting heads." The LGBTQI community will grow and aspire closer to Hashem as we all stand up and be counted and put our ten cents USD towards a cause that will bring about our atonement and redemption.



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