

The Half-Shekel

What is the purpose of the half-shekel?

Why is taking a census problematic?

Must a half-shekel be given at each census (e.g., other instances of taking a census in the Bible)?

A. Is there a Command to Count the Nation in this *Parasha*?

Parashat Ki Tisa begins with the topic of the half-shekel:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְקֻדֵיהֶם וַנְתַנּוּ אִישׁ כֹּפֶר נַפְשׁוֹ לַה' בַּפְּקֹד אֲתֶם וְלֹא יִהְיֶה בְהֶם נֶגֶף בַּפְּקֹד אֲתֶם: זֶה יִתְּנוּ כָּל הָעֶבֶר עַל הַפְּקֻדִים מִחֻצֵי הַשֶּׁקֶל בַּשֶּׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֲשָׂרִים גֵּרָה הַשֶּׁקֶל מִחֻצֵי הַשֶּׁקֶל תְּרוּמָה לַה': כֹּל הָעֶבֶר עַל הַפְּקֻדִים מִבְּנֵי עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה וָמַעְלָה יִתֵּן תְּרוּמַת ה': הָעֲשִׂיר לֹא יִרְבֶּה וְהַדֵּל לֹא יִמְעִיט מִמִּחֻצֵי הַשֶּׁקֶל לְתַת אֶת תְּרוּמַת ה' לְכַפֵּר עַל נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם: וְלָקַחְתָּ אֶת כֹּסֶף הַכֹּפָרִים מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָתַתָּ אֹתוֹ עַל עֲבֹדַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהָיָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְזִכְרוֹן לְפָנָי ה' לְכַפֵּר עַל נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם.

שמות ל', יא-טז

And God spoke to Moses, saying: “When you count the sum of the children of Israel, according to their number, then each man shall give a ransom for his soul to God, when you count them, so that there will not be plague among them when you count them. This they shall give, each one that passes among those who are counted, half a shekel of the shekel of the sanctuary – the shekel is twenty gerahs – half a shekel as a donation to God. Each one that passes among those who are counted, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the donation of God. The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than the half shekel, when they give the donation of God, to make atonement for your souls. And you shall take the atonement money from the Children of Israel and give it for the service of the Tent of Meeting, and it shall be a memorial for the Children of Israel before God, to make atonement for your souls. (Ex. 30:11-16)

What is the nation commanded to do in these verses, and why are they asked to give a half-shekel each?

The Half-Shekel – for the Census

The Torah states that the donation is contingent on the nation being counted: “When you **count** the sum of the children of Israel, according to their number...” Throughout this section, the word “count” appears four more times: “Then each man shall give a ransom for his soul to God, when you **count** them, so that there will not be plague among them when you **count** them” (verse 12); “This they shall give, each one that passes among those who are **counted**” (verse 13); “Each one that passes among those who are **counted**, from twenty years old and upward” (verse 14).

The issue of counting, clearly a central element of this *parasha*, is discussed again in *Parashat Pekudei*:

וְכֶסֶף פְּקוּדֵי הָעֵדָה מֵאֵת כָּפָר וְאֶלֶף וְשִׁבְעַת מֵאוֹת וְחֲמִשָּׁה וְשִׁבְעִים שֶׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ: בְּקַע לְגִלְגָּלֶת מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ לְכֹל הָעָבָר עַל הַפְּקָדִים מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְמוֹעֵלָה לְשֵׁשׁ מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף וְשִׁלְשֵׁת אֲלָפִים וְחֲמִשׁ מֵאוֹת וְחֲמִשִּׁים: וַיְהִי מֵאֵת כָּפָר הַכֶּסֶף לְצַקֵּת אֵת אֲדָנֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ... וְאֵת הָאֶלֶף וְשִׁבְעַת מֵאוֹת וְחֲמִשָּׁה וְשִׁבְעִים עֶשְׂרֵה וָיָם לְעִמּוּדִים...

שמות ל"ח, כה-כח

And the silver of those who were counted of the congregation was one hundred talents, and one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five shekels of the shekel of the sanctuary; one *beka* per head – half a shekel of the shekel of the sanctuary for each one who passed over those who are counted, from twenty years old and upward, for six hundred thousand and three thousand and five hundred and fifty men. And the hundred talents of silver were for casting the sockets of the sanctuary... And from the one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five shekels he made hooks for the pillars... (Ex. 38:25-28)

These verses mention that a census was taken which totaled 603,550 men; thus the amount of silver collected was 100 talents¹ and 1775 shekels. This silver was used to make the sockets and the loops of the *Mishkan*. Here Moses arranges a count of the nation using half-shekels, just as he is described doing in *Parashat Ki Tisa*.

Is there an Obligation to Count the People?

However, the phrasing of the verse – “When you count the sum of the Children of Israel” – does not match the language generally used to indicate a commandment. The word “*ki*” (translated here as “when” but which may also mean “if”)² is not usually used in an imperative context. There is no independent commandment to count the people; rather, the verses describe a potential scenario to which certain commandments apply. The verse means: “When you count the Children of Israel, then each man shall give a ransom for his soul.”³

¹ One talent is equal to 3,000 shekels. The total number of shekels collected was 301,775; since each man in the nation had given a half-shekel, this equals 603,550 men.

² The Talmud states:

דאמר ריש לקיש: “כִּי” משמש בארבע לשונות: ‘אִי’, ‘דִּילמָא’, ‘אֵלָא’, ‘דֵּהָא’.

As Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: *Ki* is used in four senses: “if,” “maybe,” “but” and “for.” (*Rosh Hashana* 3a) Rashi comments:

שמצינו בכמה מקומות “אם” משמש לשון ‘כאשר’ ולשון ‘אשר’, כמו: “ואם יהיה היובל” (במדבר ל”ו, ד), שהרי בודאי יהיה; “ואם תקריב

מנחת בכורים” (ויקרא ב’, יד) – הרי זה: “וכאשר תקריב”, שהרי חובה הוא.

For we have seen in a number of places that the word “*im*” [which generally means “if”] is used in the sense of “when,” such as: “And when [*im*] the Jubilee occurs” (Num. 36:4), for this is a certainty; “And when [*im*] you bring the meal-offering” (Lev. 2:14) – this means: “And when you bring,” for it is an obligatory [offering].

Of the four senses of *ki* quoted above, only “when” is applicable to our *parasha*.

³ A number of commandments begin with the word *ki*, meaning “if” or “when.” All of them describe a set of circumstances and then detail a commandment which would apply in those circumstances. For example: “If [*ki*] your brother becomes poor and sells of his inheritance, then his relative who is close to him shall come and redeem what his brother sold” (Lev. 25:25). Obviously, this does not indicate a commandment to be poor or for a

The lack of a direct commandment in this *parasha* becomes impossible to ignore when it is contrasted with the language the Torah uses to describe the second census in *Parashat Bamidbar*:

שָׂאוּ אֶת ראש כָּל עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל... מִבְּנֵי עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה כָּל יֶזְעָא צָבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל תִּפְקְדוּ אֹתָם לְצַבְאָתָם אֶתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן...
במדבר א', ב-ג

Count the sum of all the congregation of the Children of Israel...from twenty years old and upward, each one who is able to go out to war in Israel, **count them** by their hosts, you and Aaron. (Num. 1:2-3)

The verses in Numbers clearly indicate a commandment (“Count...count them...”), in contrast to our *parasha*, in which the imperative form is not used once.⁴

Malbim comments on the Torah’s choice of words – “When you count”:

ומה שאמר בלשון “כי תשא” שמורה על הרשות, אם תרצה לישא, ולא אמר בלשון צווי... והיה רק הודעה על העתיד באם תצטרך לכך.

And it used the words “When you count” to indicate that it is voluntary: if you wish to count; and this was not stated in the imperative...and was only a notice for the future, should you need it. (Malbim on Ex. 30:12)

There is no commandment to take a census of the nation, only a directive on **how it should be done**. When a leader wants or needs to take a census, it must be done by giving a “ransom for the soul.”⁵

poor person to sell part of his inherited land. The commandment is to redeem the land: if one sells his land, his relatives are commanded to redeem it. The commandment regarding divorce is similarly structured:

כי יקח איש אשה ובעלה והיה אם לא תמצא חן בעיניו כי מצא בה ערות דבר וכתב לה ספר פרישת ונתן בידה ושלחה מביתו: ויצאה מביתו והלכה והייתה לאיש אחר: וישנאה האיש האחרון וכתב לה ספר פרישת ונתן בידה ושלחה מביתו או כי ימות האיש האחרון אשר לקחה לו לאשה: לא יוכל בעלה הראשון אשר שלחה לשוב לקחתה להיות לו לאשה...
...
When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it was that if she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some unseemly thing in her, that he shall write her a bill of divorce and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And she leaves his house, and goes and marries another man, and the second husband comes to hate her, and writes her a bill of divorce and gives it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; or if the second husband dies, he who took her to be his wife; then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife... (Deut. 24:1-4)

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There is no obligation to hate one’s wife or divorce her; this commandment merely states that should those circumstances arise, divorce must be done in the prescribed manner, and that a man is forbidden to remarry his former wife once she has married and divorced (or been widowed by) another man. There are numerous additional examples of commandments given in this form, but these will suffice for the present discussion.

⁴ Rashi, however, notes that the verses in *Ki Tisa* may be interpreted as a commandment. He writes:

“ונתת אתו על עבודת אהל מועד” – למדת שנצטווה למנותם בתחלת נדבת המשכן אחר מעשה העגל מפני שנכנס בהם מגפה כמו שנאמר (שמות ל”ב, לה): “ויגוף ה’ את העם”.

“And give it for the service of the Tent of Meeting” – learn from this that **he was commanded** to count them at the beginning of the contribution to the *Mishkan*, after the incident of the Golden Calf, because a plague came among them, as it is said: “And God smote the nation” (Ex. 32:35). (Rashi on Ex. 30:16)

The Half-Shekel – Protection against the Dangers of Counting

How a Census should be Taken

Is this a specific commandment to take a census, or a general commandment regarding how censuses must be taken?

According to most commentators, this is a general commandment on how to take a census:

כשתחפוץ לקבל סכום מניינם לדעת כמה הם אל תמנם לגולגולות, אלא יתנו כל אחד מחצית השקל ותמנה את השקלים ותדע מניינם. ולא יהיה בהם נגף, שהמניין שולט בו עין הרע, והדבר בא עליהם, כמו שמצינו בימי דוד.
רש"י שמות ל', יב

When you wish to take the sum of their numbers, to know how many they are, do not count them directly; rather, each one shall give a half-shekel and you shall count the shekels and know their number. And they will not be struck by plague, for the Evil Eye dominates that which is counted, and pestilence may come upon them, as we saw in the time of David. (Rashi on Ex. 30:12)

According to Rashi, this is a permanent commandment: whenever an occasion arises in which the nation is counted, it must be done via the half-shekel. Ramban also interprets the verses similarly:⁶

צווה הקב"ה את משה כאשר תשא ראש בני ישראל במניין יתנו כפר נפש מחצית השקל... כלל המצווה, כאשר תשא ראשם תעשה כן, שיכנס בכלל כל פעם שימנם.
רמב"ן שם

The Holy One, Blessed be He, commanded Moses: "When you count the sum of the Children of Israel, they shall give a ransom for their souls of half a shekel, etc."... And this is a general

⁵ If this is a general commandment, and not a specific command for Moses to take a census now, why does Moses take a census before building the *Mishkan* (see *Parashat Pekudei*)? This might be a voluntary census which Moses made sure to take according to the conditions detailed by God. However, according to Ramban, Moses was commanded specifically regarding this census, although the commandment was presented as a general directive – "It was understood that he would count them now" (Ramban on Ex. 30:12). In Ramban's opinion, it is clear that these instructions include a **commandment** to count the nation immediately, and therefore the Torah did not find it necessary to include an explicit commandment to do so. Instead, it states the commandment as a general directive in order to teach us the permanent conditions of counting the nation.

⁶ In *Aderet Eliyahu*, the Vilna Ga'on writes that these verses state a general commandment detailing the way the nation must be counted:

"כי תשא את ראש וכו'" – הוא מצוה לדורות, בכל עת שימנה אותם, וכמו שאמר בשאול ודוד, וכן כתב הרמב"ן. אבל עכשיו לא נצטווה למנות כלל עד חומש הפקודים.

"When you count the sum, etc." – this is a commandment for generations, for any time they are counted; as it states by Saul and David, and so the Ramban wrote. But now he was not commanded to count at all, until the book of Numbers.

In contrast to Ramban's opinion, the Vilna Ga'on claims that God did not command Moses to count the people at this point in time (when the *Mishkan* was being built).

commandment – “When you count their number you shall do so” – to include any time he would count them. (Ramban on Ex. 30:12)

What is the rationale behind this commandment? Why must each count be done by means of the half-shekel? The verses themselves answer this question:

ונתנו איש כופר נפשו... ולא יהיה בהם נגף בפקוד אותם.

Then each man shall give a ransom for his soul...so that there will not be plague among them when you count them. (Ex. 30:12)

In addition, the phrase “to make atonement for your souls” appears twice, and the money is referred to as “atonement money.” The Torah indicates that there is an inherent danger of plague associated with the census. In order to avoid this danger, a “ransom” must be given. At the end of David’s reign (II Sam. 24) David stages a count of the nation and the nation is subsequently struck by a plague. This incident reinforces our impression that counting the nation is inherently problematic.

Why is counting the people problematic?⁷ Why might it cause a plague?⁸

Counting – Dominated by the Evil Eye

In Rashi’s opinion (see above), **counting is dominated by the Evil Eye. Therefore, people should not be counted directly, but by means of an object.** Each person donates an object, and the objects are then

⁷ While this lesson focuses on the problematic aspects of counting, some commentators view it as a positive act. The *Kli Yakar* writes:

“וידבר ה' וגו'... כי תשא את ראש בני ישראל” – בכל מקום הזכיר נשיאת ראש אצל המספר, לפי שע”י המספר ישראל מנושאים ביתר שאת על כל האומות. כי כל מספר מורה על המעלה הפרטית שיש לכל איש ואיש, כי כל דבר שאינו חשוב כמו הקש והתבן אין לו מספר. “And God spoke, etc... When you count the sum of the Children of Israel” – *Nesi’at rosh* [“counting the sum,” literally “raising the head”] is always mentioned when the nation is counted, for through counting Israel is raised above all the other nations. For each census teaches the individual value of each person, as anything that is unimportant, such as straw and chaff, is not counted. (*Kli Yakar* on Ex. 30:12)

His words are based on Rashi’s statement in his commentary on the beginning of Numbers: “Because of their dearness to Him, He counts them constantly” (Rashi on Num. 1:1).

⁸ Kasuto comments:

במסופוטמיה היו פעולות המפקד קשורות בטקס דתי של טהרה, ולטקס זה היו מייחסים חשיבות כה רבה שהמפקד כולו היה מכונה על שמו. וזה כנראה משום שהיה המפקד נחשב מעין חטא של חוסר אמונה באלוהות, ולפיכך מן הראוי היה ללוותו בטקס של כפרה וטהרה מן החטא. דומה לזו ההשקפה הישראלית, ולפיכך מדובר כאן על כופר שיש לתת בשעת המפקד, ושוב נאמר “ולא יהיה בהם נגף בפקוד אותם”, כלומר שע”י נתינת כופר זה יינצלו בני ישראל מן העונש שהיה יכול לחול עליהם מפני החטא שבעריכת המפקד.

In Mesopotamia, taking a census was linked to a religious rite of purification. This ceremony was of such great importance that the entire census was named after it. This was apparently because counting the people was considered a sin of lack of faith in the Divine. Therefore, it was accompanied by a ritual of atonement and purification from sin. This is similar to the Israelite view, and therefore a “ransom” must be given at the time of the count, and it says once again that “there will not be plague among them when you count them”; through this “ransom” the Children of Israel are saved from the punishment they might have received for the sin of taking a census. (Kasuto on Ex. 30)

Although this may have been a widespread belief at the time, since God references this idea in the Torah there is apparently an objectively problematic aspect to taking a census. We will discuss this further below.

counted instead of the people. In this way, the Evil Eye would not dominate the people. According to this interpretation, the half-shekel is the object chosen by the Torah as the indirect means of counting the nation. Abarbanel writes a lengthy essay explaining the Evil Eye's domination when people are counted directly, and that this method of counting should be avoided.⁹

Indirect Counting

There are a number of examples of indirect counting throughout the Bible:

A. During Saul's war with Amalek, the nation is counted by means of rams:

וַיִּשְׁמַע שְׂאוּל אֶת הָעָם וַיִּפְקְדֵם בְּטֵלָאִים מֵאֲתִים אֵלָּהּ רַגְלֵי וְעֶשְׂרֵת אֲלָפִים אֶת אִישׁ יְהוּדָה.

שמואל א ט"ו, ד

And Saul summoned the nation and counted them by rams, two hundred thousand footmen and ten thousand men of Judah. (I Sam. 15:4)

Saul counted the nation using rams – each man donated a ram, and the rams were counted instead of counting the people directly.

B. During Saul's war against Nahash, king of Ammon:

וַיִּפְקְדֵם בְּבֶזֶק וַיְהִיוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף וְאִישׁ יְהוּדָה שְׁלֹשִׁים אֶלֶף:

שמואל א י"א, ה

And he counted them by *Bezek*; and the Children of Israel were three hundred thousand and the men of Judah thirty thousand. (I Sam. 11:8)

Some interpret "*Bezek*" as referring to the name of the place where the count was done, but Rashi writes:

"וּפְקֻדָּתָם בְּבֶזֶק" – רבותינו אמרו בשברי חרטים. לשון אחר: "בבזק" – באבנים, שנטל מכל אחד אבן ומנאם, כמו "וּפְקֻדָּתָם בְּטֵלָאִים" – שנטל מכל אחד טלה ומנאם בהם, כמו שהיו מונים אותם בחצאי שקלים.

"And he counted them by *Bezek*" – our Sages said, **by broken pieces of pottery**. Another meaning: "by *Bezek*" – **by stones**; he took a stone from each one and counted them, like "And he counted them by rams" – he took a ram from each one and counted with them, as they would count them with half-shekels. (Rashi on I Sam. 11:8)

⁹ Abarbanel disagrees with Rashi later in his commentary (see below).

A direct count would allow the Evil Eye to dominate those being counted and cause a plague. However, when the people are not counted directly but by means of an object (a half-shekel, ram, stone, etc.) the Evil Eye cannot dominate them.¹⁰

Still, as noted above, the verses emphasize the role of the half-shekel as a “ransom” or “to make atonement for your souls.” These phrases imply that the purpose of the half-shekel is to atone for a sin,¹¹ indicating that **the census itself is problematic** and that doing so requires atonement. According to this interpretation, it does not matter whether the nation is counted is done directly or indirectly, by means of an object – counting is inherently problematic. Why?

Counting Causes Division and Negates Collective Merit

Malbim lists three reasons why counting causes a plague. One of his reasons is:

כי כל עוד שהעם מתאחדים והם כולם כאיש אחד, זכות הרבים גדול מאד, אבל כשמונים אותם, שאז מפרידים כל איש בפני עצמו, ויחופשו מעשיהם, ואז ילוט בהם הנגף.

¹⁰ The incidents in the book of Samuel seem to indicate that the permanent commandment is that when one wants or needs to count the nation this must be done by means of an object, and that any object is acceptable for this purpose. The Vilna Ga'on writes in *Aderet Eliyahu*:

ואין המצוה לדורות שיתנו מחצית השקל במנינם, שהרי שאול פקד בבזק ובטלאים. וגם לא שיתנו על אדנים, שהרי כבר נבנה המשכן. וגם שאמר "זה יתנו" וכו' – ולא נצטווה למנות. אבל הציווי לדורות נסתיים בפסוק ראשון, ו"זה יתנו" הוא ציווי עכשיו, על עבודת המשכן בלא מניין, ועל זה הציווי "לא ירבה" ו"לא ימעט", וזהו שלא מנו אותה בתרי"ג מצוות. ועל זה אמר: "תרומת ה'", "ונתת אתו על עבודת אהל מועד".

And the commandment for generations was not that they must give a half-shekel for the count, for Saul counted by *bezek* and rams. And it was not that they should give for the sockets, for the *Mishkan* had already been built. And also, that which was said: “This they will give, etc.” was not a commandment to count them. The commandment for generations was completed in the first verse, and “This they will give” was an immediate commandment [which applied only to that time] regarding serving in the *Mishkan*, without [relating to] a count, and the commandments “he shall not give more” and “he shall not give less” were given on this matter. And this is why it was not counted among the 613 commandments. And about this it was said: “donation of God,” “And give it for the service of the Tent of Meeting.”

According to the Vilna Ga'on, this section includes two commandments. The first verse: “When you count...then each man shall give a ransom...so that there will not be plague among them when you count them” is a permanent commandment to count by means of an object. From the second verse onward, the Torah describes a separate commandment to take a donation of half a shekel from each man for the building of the *Mishkan*, not for the purpose of counting.

However, the simple understanding of the verses (and the opinions of Rashi and Ramban quoted above) favors the interpretation that the half-shekel was given in order to count the nation, and that Moses was commanded to stage the count using this object specifically.

¹¹ The word “*kofer*” [ransom] refers to the sum of money paid to save a person from death: “And you shall not take ransom [*kofer*] for the soul of a murderer that is guilty of death; but he shall surely be put to death.” (Num. 35:31); see also Ex. 21:30. *Kappara*, which comes from the same Hebrew root as *kofer*, means “atonement,” nullification of sin: “And the priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven” (Lev. 4:20). Ramban links between the two words: “‘If a ransom is laid upon him’ – for the ransom [*kofer*] is an atonement [*kappara*], like the sacrifices...” (Ramban on Ex. 21:30).

For as long as the nation is united and they are all as one man, the merit of the many is great, but when they are counted each man is separated to himself, and their deeds are scrutinized, and then the plague may dominate them. (Malbim on Ex. 30)

According to this interpretation, counting is problematic because it leads to division amongst the people and the judgment of each person according to his own merits alone,¹² without the collective merit of the nation to protect him. Counting is not a sin in and of itself, but it leads to the individuals of the nation being judged harshly and receiving punishment.¹³ The half-shekel atones for each person's sins and protects them from God's Attribute of Judgment.¹⁴

This interpretation raises a number of questions: are most people really deserving of punishment? Is it only the merit of the collective that protects them? Why would counting divide the people? In fact, it

¹² Similarly, the *Kli Yakar* writes:

ורצה לומר, כשיהיו נמנין לאיזו צורך אז יעלה זכרון כל איש פרטי לפני ואז ופקדתי עליהם את חטאתם כי החטא חוזר וניעור, ע"כ צוה כאן על כופר נפש זה לכפר על מעשה העגל בשעת המספר כי יפקד מושבו על כל אחד ואחד על כן ארז"ל (אבות ב, ח): "אל תפרוש מן הצבור".
And it meant to say that when they are counted for any reason, then each individual's history comes before Me, and then I shall count the sins against them for the sins have returned and been reawakened. Therefore, He commanded them here regarding this "ransom for their souls" to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf when they were counted, for He would know each one who was found wanting. And regarding this our Sages said: "Do not separate yourself from the community" (*Mishna tractate Avot 2:8*)

¹³ Seforno also interprets the counting as a reminder of past sins:

כי הכרה המנין באישי האדם הוא מצד ההשתנות הקורה באישיו מהויה והפסד, וזה בסבת חטאם, כאמרם (שבת פרק "במה אשה יוצאה") אין מיתה בלא חטא, ובכך כל מנין הוא מזכיר עון לכן יאות שיתן כל אחד כפר נפשו לכבוד האל יתברך, והוא רחום יכפר עון, כאמרו לכפר על נפשותיכם...

For the necessity of counting the people is because they are in a constant transition from being to non-being, and this is because of their sin, as [the Sages] say: "There is no death without sin" (*Shabbat* ch. 6). And in each count recalls sins, and therefore it is fitting that each person give a ransom for his soul to God, may He be blessed, and He is merciful and atones for sins, as He said: "To make atonement for your souls." (Seforno on Ex. 30:12)

¹⁴ This explanation fits well with the requirement to give a half-shekel specifically. Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz explains:

וזהו בחינת שקלים... שמחצית השקל מרמז על בחינת אחדות, שצריך כל אדם לידע שהוא רק בחינת מחצה, וצריך להשתלם על ידי חבירו. וזהו בחינת 'ואהבת לרעך כמוך', וכשהוא מקבל מחבירו גורם לחבירו גם כן הארה ותענוג.

And this is the matter of shekels...for the half-shekel hints to the matter of unity, that each person must know that he is only a half and must be completed by his fellow man. And this is the matter of "And you shall love your fellow man as yourself," and when he receives from his friend, he causes his friend enlightenment and pleasure as well.

(*Imrei Pinchas* on Genesis, *Parashat Chayei Sarah* 26)

He writes further:

כי מחצית השקל רומז לאחדות, שכל אחד רק חצי ואינו שלם, כי אם בהתחברות חבירו... ואחדות אי אפשר להיות כי אם על ידי שפלות.
For the half-shekel hints to unity, for each person is only a half and is not complete unless united with his fellow man...and unity can only be achieved through humility. (*Imrei Pinchas* 4, *Shabbat UMoadim* 227)

The author of *Yismach Moshe* states this quite sharply:

ציוה ה' יתברך ליתן מחצית השקל להורות דאין שלמות לאיש פרטי רק כשהם באגודה אחת.
God, may He be blessed, commanded them to give a half-shekel to teach that there is no wholeness in the individual, but only when they are united in one group. (*Yismach Moshe*, *Parashat Teruma*)

seems to accomplish the opposite – it links all of the individuals into one collective. It puts emphasis not on the individual, but on community.¹⁵

Blessing Rests upon Hidden Things

Rabbenu Bayha explains the problematic aspect of counting differently:¹⁶

אין הברכה מצויה לא בדבר המדוד ולא בדבר המנוי אלא בדבר הסמוי מן העין... שהנסים הנסתרים הם בכל יום ויום ושהוא בדבר שאינו מנוי ומדוד, כי אם הייתה הברכה חלה במנוי לא היה נס נסתר אלא מפורסם ואין כל אדם זוכה לנס מפורסם... ומטעם זה צוותה התורה שלא ימנו ישראל לגולגלות אלא בשקלים כדי שתהיה הברכה חלה עליהם ברבוי זרעם בנס נסתר, ושלא ישלוט בהם עין הרע השולטת בעצם הדבר המנוי...

Blessing is not found upon things which are measured nor upon things which are counted, but upon things that are hidden from the eye...for hidden miracles occur each day with regard to things that cannot be counted or measured, for if blessing was upon something that could be counted it would no longer be a hidden miracle but a public miracle, and not every person merits public miracles... And for this reason the Torah commanded that the nation not be counted via a head-count but via shekels, so that blessing would be upon them and their descendants would be multiplied through a hidden miracle, and that the Evil Eye would not dominate them as it dominates things that are counted... (Rabbenu Bahya, introduction to *Parashat Ki Tisa*)

Counting the nation permanently sets their population at a specific number, thus preventing them from being blessed with bounty and numerous descendants.¹⁷

¹⁵ There are two major differences between the census taken in Exodus and the one taken in Numbers. In Exodus each person gave a half-shekel, and the purpose of the census is a general one: in order to know how many people there are in the nation. In Numbers, however, there is no mention of the half-shekel, and the census is more specific: "By their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, by their polls" (Num. 1:2). It is specifically during the more detailed, individual count that the people do not give a half-shekel; yet they do give a half-shekel for the more general count in Exodus.

¹⁶ This idea is also discussed by *Hizkuni* and *Malbim*. It is based on the Sages' statement in tractate *Ta'anit*: אמר רבי יצחק: אין הברכה מצויה אלא בדבר הסמוי מן העין, שנאמר: "יצו ה' אתך את הברכה באסמך" ... תנו רבנן: הננס למוד את גרנו אומר: יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלוקינו שתשלח ברכה במעשה ידנו. התחיל למוד אומר: ברוך השולח ברכה בכרי הזה. מדד ואחר כך בירך – הרי זו תפלת שוא. לפי שאין הברכה מצויה לא בדבר השקול ולא בדבר המדוד ולא בדבר המנוי אלא בדבר הסמוי מן העין.

Rabbi Yitzhak said: Blessing is only found upon things that are hidden from the eye, as it is said: "God will command the blessing with you in your storehouses" (Deut. 28:8)... The Sages taught: One who enters to measure his produce says: "May it be Your will, Lord our God, that You send blessing upon what we have done." When he begins to measure, he says: "Blessed is He who sends blessing upon this pile of produce." If he measures and then says the blessing – this is a prayer in vain, for blessing is not found upon things that are weighed, nor upon things that are measured, nor upon things that are counted, but upon things that are hidden from the eye. (*Ta'anit* 8b)

¹⁷ Still, the question remains: how does counting the nation by means of a half-shekel solve this problem? Rabbenu Bahya explains that if the people are counted indirectly, they are still able to receive blessing. However, it seems that according to his opinion, it is not the act of counting but the knowledge of the number of people in the nation that prevents them from receiving blessing. In this case, why would counting the people indirectly solve the problem?

Below we will raise another possible explanation for the negative nature of counting the nation and discuss how the half-shekel atones for it.

According to all of the commentators cited above, *Parashat Ki Tisa* details a permanent commandment: each time the nation is counted they must be counted via half-shekels, since direct counting may have negative consequences.

Was each instance of counting actually done via half-shekels?

The description of the count staged at the beginning of Numbers does not mention the half-shekel at all; neither do similar accounts of counting in *Parashat Pinchas* and other places in the Bible.¹⁸

Rashi discusses this question in his commentary on Ex. 30:15 and Num. 1:2. He states that all of the instances of counting were done via half-shekels, but the Torah does not mention this detail each time since the nation had already been given a permanent commandment to do so. His opinion is supported by the fact that in David's time, the nation was punished for counting without using half-shekels.

Other commentators, however, explain that the other instances of counting did not mention the half-shekel because this detail of the commandment applied only to the count where it is specifically mentioned. As mentioned above, Abarbanel writes that counting brings the effects of the Evil Eye and therefore a "ransom" must be brought during the count in order to negate the damage. However, this is only true of optional censuses taken on human initiative. Certainly the Evil Eye cannot dominate the nation for staging a count at God's command; in this case, there is no reason to bring "atonement for your souls." Therefore, the counts done at God's command in Numbers did not include the element of the half-shekel and this detail was not counted among the 613 permanent commandments. According to Abarbanel, the issue with counting is only when a person initiates the count by himself, without being commanded to do so by God.

In Abarbanel's opinion, the count in *Ki Tisa* (as the *Mishkan* was being constructed) was not done at God's command.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ramban states that David's sin involved his failure to use the half-shekel when counting. He writes:

ומפני שלא נתפרש כאן אם היא מצות דורות, או לשעה למשה במדבר, טעה דוד ומנה אותם בלא שקלים, והיה הנגף בהם, והתורה עליו, ויאמר דוד אל ה' חטאתי מאד אשר עשיתי.

And since it is not stated here whether this commandment is for the generations, or only for Moses in the wilderness, David erred and counted them without shekels, and a plague came upon them, and he confessed it: "And David said to God, "I have sinned greatly by what I did." (Ramban on Ex. 30:12)

¹⁹ He writes:

ואין ספק, שההזק הזה ימשך בטבע, במספר אשר יעשה האדם אותו כרצונו, כי הנעשה במצות האלהים לא יזק, כמו שאמר (קהלת ח', ה): "שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע". ואמרו חכמינו זכרונם לברכה (פסחים ח, ב): "שלוחי מצוה אינם נזוקים". הנה מפני זה כלו אמר יתברך למשה "כי תשא" רוצה לומר אתה תצטרך אל כסף הרבה לצקת את אדני הקדש ולדברים אחרים. הנה איעצך עצה נאותה לאסוף כסף הרבה, והוא, כי לפי שאתה חפץ למנות את העם ולדעת מנינם והיה המנין באנשים לגלגלותם סכנה מפני העין הרע השולט במנין הרב והמופלג, לכן תצוה שכל איש שימנה יתן כפר נפשו לה'. ולא היה זה על צד התחבולה למנות את השקלים כדברי רש"י, אלא בדרך צדקה שבהיותך מונה אותם יתן כל אחד כופר נפשו לה' כדי שיגן בעדם ויצילם מהמות והעין הרע השולט במנין. ולא יהיה לפי זה אמרו כי תשא כאשר תשא כמו שפירשוהו המפרשים אבל מלת כי בכאן תשמש בלשון הסבה יאמר בעבור שאתה תשא את ראש בני ישראל במנינם.

B. The Half-Shekel as a Donation to God

Two Reasons for Giving the Half-Shekel

As discussed above, the Torah uses words with the roots *p-k-d* and *k-p-r* a number of times throughout this section. This led us to understand that the half-shekel [“*kofer*” or “*kappara*”] was meant to atone for the count [“*mifkad*”]. However, a closer look at the verses suggests an additional layer of meaning.

The Half-Shekel as a Donation to God

The phrase “a donation to God” is also repeated a number of times. Verses 13-15 contain three instances of this phrase, emphasizing the fact that the half-shekel is given as a donation to God. Verse 16, which summarizes the section, states that the silver is given “for the work of the Tent of Meeting.” The half-shekel is mentioned first in verse 13, which states:

זֶה יִתְּנוּ כָּל הָעֶבֶר עַל הַפְּקֻדִים – מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ, עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה הַשֶּׁקֶל, מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל תְּרוּמָה לֵה’.

This they shall give, each one that passes among those who are counted, half a shekel of the shekel of the sanctuary – the shekel is twenty gerahs – half a shekel as a donation to God. (Ex. 30:13)

The first time the half-shekel is mentioned, it is not described as “an atonement for your souls” or “ransom for his soul,” but as a donation to God. This raises the question: what is the role of the half-shekel: to atone for the counting, or to be a donation to God? Was this section written in order to detail how to atone for counting the nation, or in order to describe a donation made to the *Mishkan*?

A closer reading of the verses reveals the centrality of the role of the half-shekel as a donation to God:

And there is no doubt that this damage will occur in a natural way to the counting that man does at his own will, for what is done at God’s command shall not be harmed, as it says: “He who keeps a commandment shall not know evil things” (Eccl. 8:5). And our Sages said: “Messengers for [carrying out] commandments are not harmed” (tractate *Pesachim* 8b). And because of all of this, the Blessed One said to Moses, “When you count”; He meant: You will need a great deal of silver to pour the holy sockets and the other things. And behold, I shall give you good advice to collect a great deal of silver, and it is that when you desire to count the nation and know their number, since counting the people directly brings the danger of the Evil Eye that dominates things that are counted, many and separate, you shall command that each man being counted give an “ransom for his soul” to God. And this was not merely a ploy in order to [later] count the shekels as Rashi states, but a matter of charity, for when you count them each one will give a ransom for his soul in order to protect them and save them from death and the Evil Eye that dominates that which is counted. And it was not as they said, “*Ki Tisa*” in the sense of “when you count,” as the commentators explained, but the word “*ki*” here means “because”: “Because you count the sum of the Children of Israel...”. (Abarbanel on Ex. 30:11-16)

In Abarbanel’s opinion, the count staged during the construction of the *Mishkan* was not a commandment; rather, God advised Moses regarding how to collect silver for the *Mishkan* (“Behold, I shall give you good advice to collect a great deal of silver, and it is that when you desire to count the nation and know their number...”). Abarbanel states that the silver given during the census was not a means of indirect counting, but atonement for taking a census in the first place. Any count not done at God’s explicit command is in danger of being dominated by the Evil Eye not matter how it is carried out. The “ransom” for this was the silver donated during the count.

- A. The first time the half-shekel is mentioned, it is described as a “donation to God.”
- B. This phrase is repeated three times. In addition, the silver is given “for the service of the Tent of Meeting.”
- C. These verses appear between other sections that detail the making of the *Mishkan*, strengthening the idea that this section, too, deals mainly with a donation to the *Mishkan*.
- D. In Ex. 38, which describes the construction of the *Mishkan*, the number of shekels collected is not presented as the result of the count, but as part of a summary of the materials donated for use in the *Mishkan*. The count is mentioned only in passing.
- E. Ultimately, the matter of the half-shekel, which is counted as a permanent commandment, is not related to counting the nation. It is merely a commandment to donate a half-shekel to the Temple each year.²⁰

Donation to God and Counting

This *parasha*, therefore, discusses two topics: donating to God and counting the nation. If the main topic is the donation to God, why is it presented as a donation for the purpose of counting the nation? And if the central topic is the census, why is it mentioned here, in the middle of the description of the *Mishkan*?

The Connection between Atonement and Donation

Two Separate Donations

The Netziv and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explain that there are two separate topics discussed in this section, and **two donations**: the first is the “donation to God,” which is later used in the Temple, is unrelated to the count and atonement for it; the second, “the atonement money,” atones for counting the nation. These interpretations are based on the strong impression that there are two equally important themes in this section: the donation to God and the count.

One Donation with Two Purposes

The Torah combines these two aspects of the half-shekel to the point that, at first glance, they do not seem to be two separate topics at all. The giving of the half-shekel is presented as **one donation with two purposes**: to atone for the count and to give a donation to God.

Is there a connection between these two purposes? According to the Netziv, not necessarily. The donation to God is a permanent commandment and is given each year. In contrast, the silver that was given to atone for the count, which was ultimately used in the construction of the *Mishkan*, was a one-time donation.

²⁰ Rambam states:

מצות עשה מן התורה ליתן כל איש מישראל מחצית השקל בכל שנה ושנה...

It is a biblical positive commandment for each person of Israel to give a half-shekel each year... (Rambam *Hilkhot Shekalim* 1:1)

According to most commentators, the language of the verses indicates that this section is not describing a one-time event, but an enduring commandment which stems from the inherently problematic nature of the census. Therefore, there is a fundamental connection between atonement for the census and donation to God. What is the nature of this connection?

As mentioned above, Abarbanel explains that only human-initiated censuses are problematic, and not those initiated by God. Usually censuses are taken for organizational reasons: in order to run a country properly, the number of citizens must be known so that the burden of taxes can be divided equally amongst the people and to organize services for the citizens. The most common type of count staged in the Bible is a military census, taken before going to war. Although counts done for these reasons are also initiated by humans, they do not seem to pose a problem.

Unnecessary Counting – The Sin of Arrogance

The count staged at the end of David's reign is different: there is no need to count the nation for war or organizational purposes; David seeks to count the nation for no reason. Radak explains:

אמרו רז"ל: כל זמן שנמנו ישראל לצורך לא חסרו, שלא לצורך חסרו, כמו בימי דוד...

Our Sages said: Whenever Israel was counted for a purpose they were not diminished, [but when they were counted] with no purpose they were diminished, as in the days of David...

David did not have a legitimate reason to count the people.²¹ His urge to count them stemmed from his desire to feel that he ruled over a great nation. Apparently, this was the root of the problem, as Abarbanel writes:

הכה לב דוד אותו, שראה חטאו במה שהתגאה עם עמו ונחלתו ומה' יסור לבו שהוא העזר האמיתי...

David's heart struck him, for he saw his sin in that he had become excessively proud of his nation and his inheritance, and his heart turned away from God, the true Helper...

Ralbag also explains David's sin in a similar fashion:

²¹ According to the *Or HaChaim*, this is exactly what the Torah sought to prevent by including the phrase "according to their number":

עוד ירצה באומרו לפקודיהם וגו', שאין לך רשות למנותם אלא לסיבת פקודיהם, פירוש לצד חסרונם אם נחסרו מהם ותרצה לעמוד על הנשארים, או שנכנסו בגדר הכנת החוסר, כאומרו (במדבר לא מט) עבדיך נשאו את ראש וגו', לצד שירדו למלחמה, או לסיבת צורך המספר לערוך מלחמה עם אויב וכדומה, ובא לשלול שאין למנותם בלא סיבה.

And it further meant by "according to their number, etc." that a count is allowed only because of their number, if they have been diminished and you seek to count those who remain, or to ascertain how many are missing in order to compensate for the losses, as it said: "Your servants have taken the sum, etc." (Num. 31:49), in order to go to war, or if the number is needed in order to wage war against an enemy, etc. And this comes to exclude **counting them without a reason**. (*Or HaChaim* on Ex. 30:12)

והנה החטא היה בזה המספר לפי מה שאחשוב כי זה יורה על שדוד היה שם בשר זרועו בכטחו על רב העם ולא היה ראוי שיבטח כי אם בשם יתברך...

And behold, the sin was in the counting, as I understand, for this shows that David put his faith in the great numbers of the nation, and he should not have trusted anyone but God, may He be blessed...

Counting the nation brings a feeling of power and possibly even arrogance. Even when the nation is counted for the purpose of going to war, there is still concern that they might come to rely on their own strength of numbers instead of relying on God. While there is no choice but to count the nation under these circumstances, there is still concern that it would cause the nation to become arrogant, which would cause a plague to come upon them. Therefore, when counting for this purpose it is especially important to remember Who gives the nation the power to succeed in battle.

David's count did, in fact, cause a plague, demonstrating that counting without a legitimate reason is problematic. Yoav senses this immediately when David asks him to count the nation:²²

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹאָב אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיֹּסֶף ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶל הָעָם כְּהֵם וְכַהֵם מֵאָה פְּעָמִים וַעֲיִנֵי אֲדֹנָי הַמֶּלֶךְ רְאוּת וְאֲדֹנָי הַמֶּלֶךְ לְמָה תִּפְזַר בְּדָבַר הַזֶּה. שמואל ב כ"ד, ג

And Yoav said to the king: "The Lord your God will add to the people, however many they may be, a hundredfold, and the eyes of my lord the king shall see it; but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?" (II Sam. 24:3)

The Donation – A Solution to the Problem of Arrogance

A Combination of Counting and Donation

How should a count be done in order to avoid the risk of arrogance? God teaches us how to properly conduct a census: it must be combined with a donation to God in order to remind us Who made us plentiful and gave us the power to succeed.

Parashat Ki Tisa – Counting and Building the Mishkan

In the midst of the commandments concerning the *Mishkan*, God commands Moses to count the nation by giving a donation to Him. The purpose of this is in order to remind us specifically at that time of the presence of the Divine amongst the nation, our dependence on God, and the need to turn to Him.²³

²² The *Or HaChaim* explains why Yoav did not prevent David from counting the nation:

אפשר שחשב כשראה דבר מלך חזק עליו אמר אולי שיש לו טעם נכמס וחש על עצמו ממרוד במלכות, ולעולם לא מנאם אחד אחד. He may have thought when he saw that the king's word was stronger than he, saying, "Perhaps he has a hidden reason," and he feared appearing as a rebel against the kingdom, and he never counted them [directly] one by one. (*Or HaChaim* on Ex. 30:12)

²³ In his article "*Machatzit HaShekel – Mitzva SheLeAta Oh Mitzva LeDorot*," Rabbi Samet points out that the Torah uses very specific verbs to describe the people's donation to the *Mishkan*: "taking" (see Ex. 25:1-9; 27:2; 35:5) and

Moses demonstrated the proper way to stage such a count and how it merges with building the *Mishkan*.

Numbers – The Census and the Camp of the Divine Presence

The half-shekel is not mentioned in Numbers, since there God commanded Moses to count the nation and therefore there is no danger of a subsequent plague. As Abarbanel explained, when God commands the nation to take a census they will not be harmed, as they are under God's protection.

The nation would not be harmed in this case as this kind of census is considered legitimate – it is not a result of the nation's desire to see how strong they are; they are merely obeying God's command. Furthermore, the purpose of the census in Numbers is to organize the Israelite camp and set a place for the camp of the Divine Presence in the center. Its purpose was clearly not to assess the independent strength of the nation, but the reverse – to welcome the Divine Presence into the camp.

David's Census and Acquiring the Place of the Temple

In David's time, the census was not taken for organizational purposes or due to God's command. The half-shekels meant to remind the nation of God's sovereignty were not taken either. This type of counting reinforces man's arrogance, and therefore it was followed by a plague.

What finally counteracted the negative effects of the count and stopped the plague? The plague stopped when David acquired the place where the Temple was to stand and built an altar to God. Once again, a link is drawn between the issue of counting and making a donation towards the Temple. This connection is not a coincidence: donating to God or addressing Him through the Temple demonstrates that man understands the ultimate insignificance of numbers. Power lies in God's hands alone. This negates the arrogance caused by counting and stops the plague.

Giving a half-shekel is, therefore, not only an outward atonement for the problem caused by counting – it is actually the solution to the problem. **Giving a donation shifts the focus of the count from human pride to the centrality of God.** This solves the problems potentially caused by counting, and transforms the army into God's army. The count itself becomes a donation to God.

“bringing” (see Ex. 35:5, 21-29). The reason for this is clear: man can never give anything to God, for the earth and everything in it belongs to Him. This explains the puzzling lack of the verb “give” in favor of its opposite, “take” – “And they shall take a donation for Me.” The verb “give” appears only in this section of *Ki Tisa* and is repeated five times, once in each verse. Verse 12: “**Each man shall give** a ransom for his soul”; verse 13: “This **they shall give**, each one that passes among those who are counted...”; verse 14: “Each one that passes...**shall give** the donation of God”; verse 15: “When **they give** the donation of God...”; verse 16: “And **give it** for the service of the Tent of Meeting...”.

The reason for this difference is that man cannot give for such a lofty cause as building the *Mishkan*; however, he may give a donation for his own sake as a “ransom for his soul” in order to avoid a plague. In fact, the entire nation gives “atonement money” to God: “And you shall take the atonement money from the **Children of Israel...**”