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Ki Sissa

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Our Torah Reading this morning begins by telling us of a very ordinary, prosaic affair in the life of the nation of Israel some 3500 years ago. Moses is commanded to take the census, to count the people. And one may wonder: why does such a common, unspectacular event have to be mentioned in our Torah? Our Torah is not a text-book of political science, it is not a tract on the workings of government, and it is not a book on civics. Why, then, mention a census, even if it is Moses who is in charge?

Perhaps one answer may be found in the sort of language the Torah uses to describe G-d's command to Moses to muster his people. He says, and these are the opening words of the Sidra, KI SISSA ES ROSH BNEI YISRAEL -- when you will count the Children of Israel. That is what it means. However, literally speaking, the words actually mean, when translated from the Hebrew idiom: WHEN YOU WILL LIFT THE HEAD OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL. That is the way the Bible ~~wants the Jews to be counted,~~ uses the Hebrew expression for counting -- KI SISSA ES ROSH BNEI YISRAEL, "when you lift the head of the Children of Israel." And in the use of this particular idiom, we have a great lesson, one which changes an ordinary procedure of census into a great challenge to today's Jews, and particularly to today's Jewish youth.

We are growing up in a strange world. It talks a lot about freedom -- and yet does not allow us the freedom to choose our own way of life, but tries to force us to accept what most people do. It talks about the individual -- and forces him to follow the majority standards, whether right or wrong. It tells us to think creatively, but punishes us if we dare to think of something we are not expected to think about. There is a word for it -- conformity. If we conform then, as ~~Jews~~, we will all go to ^{certain} ~~good~~ colleges, wear crew-cuts and dark sport coats, vote liberal, become agnostics the first three years of college, and in the fourth consent to attend an occasional Late Friday Service. We will marry, ^{perhaps} live in a suburb, and go through the same routine as everyone else, never changing one whit. We will walk

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about Religion, and try to teach it to our children, but never take it seriously in our own lives. And if anywhere along the line we try to change from this accepted pattern -- we are singled out for amazed looks, for raised eyebrows, for slight contempt.

In a word, we are expected more and more to be just a number, a statistic. ~~Our~~ People are being cowed -- they must remain part of the group or mob, and they must never do differently. So that the idea of counting people, of assigning numbers to them, of considering them just part of a statistical figure, is the idea of conformity, of stripping them of their individuality. A number or statistic has no character and no individuality.

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That is why the Torah says not ^{אָנֹכֶנִי} KI SIMNEH or ^{אָנֹכֶנִי} KI SIFKOD, which means "when you will count," but KI SISSA ES ROSH -- "when you lift their heads". When a Moses counts, when a Torah takes a census, it is to count INDIVIDUALS, ~~to~~ people, ~~to~~ thinking, ^{and} feeling human beings, and not mere sheep in a flock. Torah tells us to be part of the larger group ~~of the People of Israel~~, but to remain as individuals, with our heads lifted high, unafraid, thinking, responsible children of G-d.

We of Kodimoh should stress that gain and again. The greatness of Judaism lies in its individuality, and in its insistence that we remain ^{אָנֹכֶנִי יִסְּמֶנִי} BE'TZELEM ELOKIM, in the Image of G-d. Orthodox Judaism is the Judaism that has its head raised above the clamor of the crowd, that has it lifted above the commonness of life.

We of Bnei Mitzvah, the youth of this, our beloved Kodimoh, want to grow up in that tradition of KI SISSA ES ROSH. In an age when we are pressed to conform without much thinking, we choose to think. We choose to remain loyal to Torah even if others do not. We choose to grow up in the tradition of Orthodox Judaism even when others think it queer and old-fashioned. For we know that just as Israel is deathless, so is Torah and so is the Tradition we now call Orthodoxy.

To that end are we dedicating our efforts as Bnei Mitzvah. To you, our elders,

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do we look for continued encouragement in KI SISSA, in keeping our heads high. We hope it will be soon that you will provide our new building for us, so that we may be proud of our organizational achievements. We hope you will continue to sponsor our youth activities so that we may teach others to join us in this Jewish posture of - keeping the head high, of KI SISSA. And we hope that in all aspects of life, as a congregation and as individuals, you yourselves will try to realize that great and noble teaching of Torah-- to be ourselves, unafraid of all the world in our love for g-d; unyielding to any outer pressure as long as we respond to our inner need for the love of Torah.

For this way will the head of Israël always be held high.