



## DIVREI MENACHEM

BY MENACHEM PERSOFF

Special Projects Consultant, OU Israel Center  
menpmp@gmail.com

# Forging Our Jewish Identity

In today's so-called enlightened world, where national identity is blurred, and egocentricity is so enjoined, we are relieved that the Parshah's description of the census in the wilderness focuses on a typology of factors that influence positive identity formation.

The census was primarily conducted to locate men eligible for the army. In charge were Moshe and Aharon, two leaders, the spiritual giants for the people in the desert, akin to the Gadol Hador for so many today.

Notably, the Torah narrative tells us that all the males over twenty years of age were to be counted "according to their families, their fathers' households, and their legions" (Bemidbar 1:2-3.).

The census was conducted in the presence of the tribal leaders who served as mediators between the counted individuals, the "king" and his deputy. Moreover, knowing their tribes, the tribal leaders could quickly introduce the would-be warriors to Moshe personally, thus enhancing the people's dignity, self-respect, and standing in the community.

Once the census was complete, Moshe organized the tribes with their respective banners into four groups of three

surrounding the Mishkan. Each "banner" had its appointed place in the camp facing the Sanctuary, which served as a spiritual magnet. The Mishkan was a daily reminder of the Source of all sustenance that united the people's sense of national pride and purpose.

We see that the people's identity was shaped in ways that incorporated distinctive experience, family, community, and nationhood. Although united as a corporate entity, each individual constituted an original being with dreams, ambitions, and personal attributes. However, each could see himself connected to family roots and part of a more significant entity – whether as a tribal member or as one of the people as a whole – an emerging nation that would become known as Bnei Yisrael and, today, as the Jewish people with its own exalted land, the State of Israel.

No wonder the three paragraphs of the Shema treat, respectively, of the individual, the community, and the nation.

Each of these three elements of our social being plays its part in shaping our past, present, and future conceptions of ourselves and the way we serve Hashem. May we thus be worthy of spreading this message so that "our days be multiplied on the land which the Lord swore unto your forefathers to give them, as the days of the heavens above the earth" (Devarim 9:21). ■

*Menachem Persoff*