

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

One Shabbos morning, when my oldest son was a little boy, we walked together to *shul*. We discussed the *sidrah*, which was Ki Sisa. I told him, “Moshe was told to count the Jewish people by counting coins they were to give.” He listened as I continued, “You must always count Jews indirectly, like when we count to see if we have a *minyan* in *shul*.”

My son considered this and I went on. “You know how we use a *pasuk* that contains ten words and count indirectly that way?” (Actually, I like to use a verse from Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “*To be or not to be, that is the question.*” Will there “be” a *minyan* or not? But I’m just showing off my British roots!)

My son frowned and asked, “Why can’t you count directly?”

I was able to tell him that the second Rashi supplies the answer: “When there is a number, the *ayin hara* is given power, and disease can attack the Jewish people, as when King David counted them.”

“That’s not fair!” my son replied, “If King David counted the Jewish people and did something wrong, *he* should be punished. Why should the entire Jewish people suffer?”

The Dubner Magid provides the answer in his *Ohel Yaakov*. If someone were to steal a few of your bricks and use them to build a wall of his house, you cannot demand that he tear down the entire wall to recover the bricks. You can of course demand financial redress for the theft. If, however, he decides later to take down the wall to extend his home and you can identify your bricks lying on the ground, you can demand their return.

The reason that you cannot force the thief to give back the actual bricks in the first case is because they are now part a structure whose removal would disfigure it, like the smile of a child who has lost

his front teeth.

In the same way, each one of us is a unique “component” of *Klal Yisrael*, although only one person, we are part of something much bigger. When a Jew is part of the Jewish people, even though he or she may have done things that deserve certain suffering or death (*chas v’shalom*), being part of *Klal Yisrael* protects and guards us. Our removal and the gap it would leave might disfigure the structure that is left.

At the time of David HaMelech’s counting of the Jews, many of the generation deserved to die. Being part of *Klal Yisrael* saved them. Counting individualizes and separates us from others, “one Jew, two, three” isolates us from the rest. Counting detaches us from the *klal*; and attaching ourselves to the *klal* is crucially important for any Jew.

The Yismach Yisrael illustrates this when pointing out that Hashem takes every other Jew into account when He decides the fate of one of their number. How it will affect his family, friends, business associates and community is all taken into consideration.

In Shmuel 1:14, 45, Shaul’s son, Yonasan, faced death. The fact that the Jewish people did not deserve the pain of his loss at that time meant that he survived.

And *Chazal* say that even our most heartfelt prayers and pleas may still fail



to gain entry into heaven unless they are carried there alongside and part of the prayers of a *minyan*.

Reb Shlomo Wolbe, *zt”l*, writes about this in *chelek beis* of *Alei Shor*, “Who knows how much *siyata diShmaya* a person *steals* from himself because he does not make sure his prayers are offered regularly as part of a *minyan*?”

I sometimes wonder if my prayers are going to be heard. But when I say those words, “*To be or not to be, that is the question,*” as long as each word attaches me to nine Jewish souls I am standing beside, and I know I am part of a *minyan*, then the answer to the question of whether they are going to be heard is “yes.” ■

Rabbi Y. Y. Rubinstein is an author of six books. And an international speaker and Gateways lecturer. He teaches at Machon Basya Rochel in Lawrence, NY.