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THE NUMBERING OF THE PEOPLE
THE CONGREGATION'S PARAMOUNT DUTY

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Sermon preached in the Spanish and
Portuguese Synagogue Shearith Israel,
Central Park West and Seventieth St.,
New York City, on Sabbath Ki Tissa,
20 Adar, 5672, 9 March, 1912.

BY

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Acting Minister of the
Congregation

The Numbering of the People

THE CONGREGATION'S PARAMOUNT DUTY

"Everyone who passes among those numbered from twenty years old and upward shall give his tribute to the Lord." Exodus, XXX, 14.

The opening verses of this week's Parasha, from which our text is taken, give directions in what spirit the census of the people should be taken. We read¹ that when king David numbered the people, his sturdy general, Joab, protested against the action which he knew to be a sin, "and David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the Lord I have sinned greatly in that I have done." For, say the Rabbis,² king David did wrong in that he did not ask from the people the tribute for the Lord demanded by our text. He counted his people in pride of heart to know how many were able to offer tribute and service to him, the earthly king, without the thought of counting those able to offer tribute and service to the Lord, the King of kings.

Ever and anon a synagogue finds it needful to take a census of its members; this morning, let us of this congregation number the men of twenty years old and upward who, following the teachings of the text, give tribute and service to the Lord.

One by one the older members who stood in the front rank of those willing to offer service to the Lord are being taken from us. Are their survivors stepping forward to fill the gaps in the ranks? As year by year we lose those whose training in Hebrew and whose knowledge of Judaism fitted them to offer Jewish service to the Lord, it becomes ever more manifest that too often their place is not being filled and cannot be filled by the younger generation. In common with every other synagogue in this country, we find that the men of to-day of twenty years and upwards are neither equipped with knowledge nor disciplined by youthful training to offer the same *Jewish* service to the Lord as did those who are passing from us. We cast our eyes over the synagogue benches and ask where are the young men of twenty years old and upwards? It is true that their names figure on the congre-

gational membership list; but on the Sabbath, the weekly day of muster for the Jewish people, should not everyone on that list be here in his appointed place to attest his loyalty to his people and his God? No one claiming for himself the title of Jew may be exempted from this weekly offering of service to the Lord; and if in singular obliquity we are content to number the people by the list without demanding from them the prescribed tribute of service for God, shall there not fall upon us the stroke of the Lord that smote king David and his people when mere numbers were paraded without the offering of service to the Lord?

But we do not despair of our future. Time and time again we have taken comfort and hope from the name of the Synagogue **שארית ישראל** "the remnant of Israel." All history tells us that the masses of Israel have always been lost—ten tribes out of twelve were lost in one gigantic upheaval; but all history tells us that the remnant of Israel must always live. The paralysis of indifference, the treachery of intermarriage, the suicide of assimilation may wreak their havoc upon some of our members; but God works with the faithful remnant that refuses to be swept by the whirling stream of religious assimilation into the irresistible vortex of absorption. We put not our trust in numbers, we look for salvation from the faithful few, the **שארית ישראל** the remnant of Israel over which the prophet rejoiced.³ Therefore we face the future serenely, knowing that with God's blessing there will always be a faithful remnant of those who have gone before, to carry on our treasured tradition. Does it seem sad that the future is pledged to a remnant, and only a remnant? Such is God's universal way of working throughout all nature. Of the many seeds sown but few come to fruition; and no synagogue may hope to gather fruit from all the seeds it plants.

A reading of the history of this or of any other historic congregation evinces the same law of the survival of only a chosen remnant, and reveals to us a continuous infiltration of new forces to maintain the congregation. The personnel of every congregation inevitably changes with time's relentless flow. As we number the congregation to-day, how many can we count bearing the honored name of Judah, Gomez, Hart, Hays or Seixas—families once so numerous in this synagogue? Families become scattered; time's irresistible democracy brings low those who sit in high places and raises the lowly, and nature inexorably decrees that human stock must die out unless it be rejuvenated by an infusion of new blood.

Therefore, as we number the congregation and lament that the young do not always take the place of the old trusted warriors who are taken from us, shall we not aver that no congregation can live wholly on its inherited forces? Every historic community needs accretions from without if it is to endure in vigor. Throughout the two hundred and fifty years of our existence as a congregation, the requisite rejuvenation has been infused into us in every generation by the coming of a new member here, a fresh family there, and from time to time even of a small immigrating band of families. But at this moment there is presented to the congregation a more wonderful opportunity of gathering into its ranks new warriors to serve in God's cause than it has known ever before. For there have come thronging to our doors ten thousand of our nearest kin, able and willing to offer the same service to the Lord as the founders of this congregation gave. We dare no longer rest supine on the decaying merit of past achievement. We shall be culpably false to our duty if we sit inertly dreaming of our past or passing warriors, if we number our people by the nominal membership list, while ten thousand of these, our own closest brethren, have come to our doors awaiting a word of welcome. It is true that we welcome anyone and everyone who comes to us prepared to serve God with our ancient traditional forms of service. But before all we should welcome those of our brethren, be they poor as Hillel or of as lowly birth as the prophet Amos, whose ritual is our own, whose Hebrew accent is our own, whose traditions are our own, and whose ancestry and history are our own.

It is the most urgent and imperative duty of our congregation to-day not to stand passively aloof awaiting their coming to us, but to go out to them offering a friendly, helping hand of welcome. For our own future as a congregation and for their future as faithful servitors of God in this land of unknown trials, we are obligated with the sacred force of moral and religious compulsion to go out to them and bring them to us to unite together in the service of God. Some of the active members of our congregation are awakening to this unique opportunity of swelling the ranks of those who may be counted as offering our Sephardic tribute of service to the Lord; but to the shame of our men be it said that the realization of this new responsibility has been left largely to the women of the Sisterhood.

The religious organization of our Oriental kith and kin is a labor that calls immediately for the most willing and energetic

service of the whole congregation, men, women and children. It is a work that demands the tact born of sympathy, the self-sacrifice born of human love, and the truest feeling of brotherhood born of love of God. If this God-given opportunity of numbering living Jewish men and women able to give service to God, and of no longer counting by a meaningless list of names, be neglected by the members of the synagogue, then woe for the congregation upon which will fall the stroke of God, as it fell upon king David and his people when they were numbered in pride without giving to God the tribute of service.

But if we as a congregation undertake this work of the religious organization of these Oriental Jews, then shall the blessing of God fall upon us as we number no longer the inert members on the list, but the living active men of twenty years old and upwards who are able to give their tribute of service unto the Lord. Then shall our community blossom forth into a new life that shall be brilliant and glorious; and, when we number the people, there will be fulfilled in us the ancient blessing:⁴ "May the Lord, God of your fathers, add to you the like of you a thousand times, and bless you as he has promised to you."

(¹) II. Sam. XXIV, I. Chron. XXI.

(²) Midrash Tanhuma, Ki Tissa, 9; Lekach Tob to Exod. XXX, 12; Josephus, Antiq. VII, 13, 1.

(³) Jeremiah XXXI, 6.

(⁴) Deuteronomy I, 11.

