

Families

After dealing with Phineas and his dramatic action to stop the moral collapse of the Israelite princes and a serious plague, the Torah switches to a census of the remaining Israelites. It seems a totally unconnected transition. The clue to the link lies in the fact that this time, the census focuses on families. Each tribe is broken down into family units.

The Bible establishes three units. The Nation, the Children of Israel, which is broken down into Tribes and Tribes are divided into Families. On the face of it this conflicts with the administrative division that Jethro recommended that the people be subdivided into "thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens" (Exodus 18.25).

That division that Jethro recommended was purely administrative. It could be used for the military, for taxation and to apply justice as well as social services. It was a system that the government, in whichever form, could apply. It was a tool of leadership whoever or whatever the leadership was.

Tribes were a more religious, historical and cultural level of divisions. Each with its own territory, religious functions and histories. The leader, Moses, had to exercise control at the national level. The princes of the tribes exercised it on a personal level. But tribes were large, some 60,000 strong. It was left to families to take on the responsibility for moral values and bringing up the children.

The Crisis with Midian attacked the core of the family unit. If husbands were abandoning their homes and families for idolatry and prostitution, the whole family unit would suffer. And if they were behaving this way, clearly their parents had not succeeded in passing family values on. They had it seems left all of this to Moses. They had relinquished their roles. Which of course is what happens in all dictatorships, all authoritarian regimes. The trouble is that when this happens, the collapse is all the more dramatic. It is up to families to take responsibility for their children. Not to leave it to society in general.