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NOT ONE, NOT TWO, NOT THREE . . .

To see whether a quorum of ten is present for a prayer service it has been customary to count negatively: not one, not two, not three, and so on.

It has always struck moderns as being a quaint practice, the survival of a superstition—fear of the evil eye—resulting from the danger of numbers. To call this custom a superstition, however, does not fully explain the custom. Judaism has no rigorous and functional definition of what constitutes a superstition. It is suggested that negative counting derives from the most exquisite understanding of Jewish faithfulness.

Community prayer in contradistinction to private prayer, requires the presence of ten adult males before prayer commences. The number ten is important; for ten represents the community in miniature. These ten adult males are a small community representing the larger community—a community in prayer. Thus each person is not an isolated individual, rather each is a Jewish person relating to every other Jewish person present. This is the reason that the overwhelming proportion of prayers use the first person plural rather than the first person singular. It is “we,” a community, that address the ultimate Person.

A genuine community is not simply a sociological institution made up of objects called individuals. Modern Jews frequently believe that institutions make up a community. Yet it is becoming more and more apparent, by virtue of various problems, that this is not correct. There are those today who believe that when the establishment is destroyed it will be replaced by a genuine community where people have positive feelings for one another. But this, too, is not so; feelings make pure sub-

jectivity. Community depends not on feelings but on relationships. Buber writes: "The true community does not arise through peoples having feelings for one another (though indeed without it), but through, first, their taking their stand in living mutual relation with a living Center, and, second, their being in living mutual relation with one another. The second has its source in the first, but is not given when the first alone is given. Living mutual relation includes feeling but does not originate with them. The community is built up out of living mutual relation, but the builder is the living effective center."¹

This community presupposes a relationship. Objects can have experiences with, or of, one another; but only persons have mutual relationships. Those who come to a service come as persons living a mutual relationship with a Living Center and living a mutual relationship with one another. Even a stranger passing through town, and therefore attending a service only once, is not really a stranger; for he is a member of the community of Israel, sharing various realities.

Now to count persons who are in community is to transform them from persons into objects or units; for to count means to objectify. Number reduces the totality ("person") to a fragment—a unit in a series. If the persons who are together for a service are counted, the counting process itself objectifies them in each others eyes and each in his own eyes. Each person becomes both to himself and to the other an *It*. They therefore would be not a community in prayer; for a community is made up of persons. They would be simply an institution and institutions do not pray.

The whole conception of *minyan* is paradoxical. The word *minyan* means "a counting." Yet the men should not be counted. The necessity for counting presupposes an abnormal situation. It would imply an uncertainty as to whether there is a community at prayer. Counting must be resorted to when a small handful of people come together. It is also an indication of a poverty of persons—that less than ten adult males live in the town or area. Counting, therefore, is an indication of the decline of a particular community of believers. It is not only an indication

1) Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, New York, Scribners, 1965, p. 45.

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of devotional poverty but indicates the absence of a large community of faithful Jews.

Perhaps in earlier times congregations did not have to be counted; for it is not sentimentality to believe that, historically, most Jews took community prayer seriously.

Counting, as we have suggested, is an indication of the community being transformed to institution and the attenuation of a Jewish community. To further guard against corrosion, congregations employ the paradoxical and profound device of negative counting. Negative counting is both an admission of a decline and a guarding against the immediate danger of further transformation.

That counting of persons is a dangerous metaphysical enterprise has evidently a long history in Jewish existence. We read of David's census taking which was punished by a plague. Presumably the negative counting of the *minyan* is rooted in an ancient tradition. The tradition was so deeply rooted that counting must have always been considered a dubious act. Indicative of this is the very use of the term *minyan* for a quorum. The need for counting was a late necessity but which was introduced only by counting negatively; for what must be protected was the reality of the community of persons, protected against being transformed into objects. For if persons should be transformed into objects then community degenerates into an institution. Negative counting is a hedge against deflation—the deflation of persons into statistical units.