

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Bamidbar

I really enjoy challenging my Bar or Bat Mitzvah students to think outside of traditional boxes. When a 12 year old begins training, I sit them down and ask the simple question, " $2+2=?$ " Invariably I get a quick response with a slightly disgusted look, "4." I then ask them to give me a different correct answer. This is when the puzzled looks begin. I share that there are an infinite number of correct answers to the question, and while they are not quite sure what I am talking about, I add, " $2+2=5-1$, 1000-996, or 536,004 - 536,000." I get my obligatory nod of the head as they begin to think I am crazy. I then move in for the kill. "Prove to me that $2+2=0$." Most often, they cannot. Just as I explain how this works, I then ask them to prove that $2+2=3$. By the way, if you, the reader, want either answers, you'll have to either make a sizable donation to our Temple General Fund or simply demonstrate that you read this and ask. The bottom line is that I want students to understand that numbers, by themselves, are meaningless. They can be manipulated in all sorts of ways. Value is a matter of what we do with the numbers. Counting only matters if there is some purpose behind the exercise.

This week, we begin a new Book of the Torah. In Hebrew, the Book is Bamidbar. In English, we call it Numbers. I am somewhat amused by the satire that stems from the co-existence of these two names. Yes, we begin the book counting the census, hence its English title. Also, yes, we enter this part of the story in the midst of the barren wilderness. As the book begins, we find ourselves counting the male members of the tribes in the middle of nowhere in an effort to assess Israel's military strength. There is not a current war happening. In fact, if one takes the chronology of the bible literally, we have gone an entire book without a skirmish. Those who read ahead understand that there are ore wars to fight (and hence understand this counting), but it seems odd at this point in the story to count soldiers - hence the irony of the wilderness. It becomes our job to make some sense out the exercise.

Perhaps Israel does know it is about to be attacked (many chapters later). Perhaps, though, while we focus on the idea that we count people who are able to go to war, we make a bigger statement firmly rooted in the satire to which I spoke. Who is not counted? We are not counting any female in this number. And this is not just a matter of patriarchal bias, since the male and female children are ignored, as are the men who would be too old to serve in battle, but who would be running the government. Additionally, the entire tribe of Levites is ignored in this count, even though the Torah makes an effort to let us know that the priests carried the ark of the covenant into battle. The Levitical priests, I guess were spiritual warriors, but did not count in the armed forces. So, we count only a fraction of the people, and only a fraction of the people who serve to make policy that involve matters of war, in a time when there is no war.

Does this not sound familiar? We engage in all sorts of studies and polls that become the dogma of politicians and institutions. Two different groups will separate polls on the same subject and come up with two completely different answers. Of course, they polled different segments of the population and skewed their questions to get desired results. "Have you stopped beating your wife?" is an untenable question, however you answer it there are all sorts of difficult presumptions one already makes about you in presenting it to you for an answer. This is no different than when a local "peace and justice" organization in town advertised an event to protest "war criminal" former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

The man has yet to be charged in any legal proceeding, yet the invitation prejudices the reader - yes, we all want to prosecute war criminals. Worse yet are the political polls we get in the mail. When former President George Bush first ran for office against former Vice-President Al Gore, I received "autographed" pictures of both men thanking me for serving on their steering committees. My answers to their polls were, I thought, consistent. Obviously, they both thought I was on their respective side. The most egregious of polling abuse occurs in religion, where people proclaim the numbers that they count (the truths they espouse) to be the only legitimate use of the text provided as scripture. I read the New Testament and see nothing new, for I read it through the lens of Jewish ritual and history. Everything that is there already exists in our tradition. Christianity reads the very same text and sees something completely different. No differently, our Torah portion presumes that the only people worth counting are the soldiers. Too many people begin with the presumption that their lens is the only one through which to read scripture. Rather than being amazed at how broad faith can be; rather than celebrating the many paths that lead us all to the same God, we are going to segment a piece of the population (our own), and lost in the wilderness of our own ego, pretend that we are the only ones that matter. Our tradition teaches that the military class was only one piece of our society, and not the most productive piece, either. I find it somewhat amusing that those who created the canon found the need to start one of the five books of Torah with only them. No, everyone matters and everyone counts ... no exceptions. Anything else is manipulative folly that will serve to separate us and not unite us. Shabbat Shalom.