



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Bamidbar 5773

By Dahlia Bernstein

May 11, 2013

My father, Rabbi Morris Bernstein was drafted into the U.S. Navy and served as a sailor, aiding Israel during the Yom Kippur War. My grandfather, Sidney Bernstein, served in the U.S. Army during WWII. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and liberated the slave labor camp of Ulm, among others. Reading *Parashat Bamidbar*, which opens with a census of Israelite males of military age, I think with pride and honor of my family's history of armed service and it inspires me to do what I can to serve my own community.

Parashat Bamidbar begins with a description of the second census of the Israelites to take place in the Torah.¹ God commands Moses:

Take a census of the whole Israelites community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms. Associated with you shall be a man from each tribe, each one the head of his ancestral house.²

While the first census, in Exodus, counts the Israelites individually, this second census in Bamidbar counts all males over the age of 20 by family and tribe, according to the line of their ancestors. One might think that this organization by tribe is merely functional, as the Israelites are being mustered for battle over the Land of Israel and need to be grouped to strategically to enter into the land. Yet, on the contrary, over centuries biblical commentators have argued that there is a deeper meaning to this type of organization.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th-century German rabbi and commentator, explains the significance of the Israelites being counted as part of their ancestral houses:

Even when there were Israelite descendants by the tens of thousands, they were all members of the "one house," sons of "one man" (Jacob), with one seal still engrained in their hearts and souls, and they passed their inheritance from one generation to the next, an inheritance of a common task and a common future. Within this unity, there was a multitude of qualities that were kept and nourished, especially in tribes and families.... Every tribe and every family unit worked towards the joint tasks of the house of Israel and shaped and educated their children. Therefore, there are not thousands of Israelites together like an undivided mass, rather they are counted by "family, according to the house of their fathers."³

According to Hirsch, there is a deeper purpose to the ritual of being arranged by family. Although there are now 603,550 Israelites, the familial counting reminds each person that he originally came from only 12 brothers—

¹ The first census is described in Exodus 30:12.

² Numbers 1:2-4. Translation from Etz Hayim Humash.

³ Samson Raphael Hirsch, Commentary on Numbers 1:2.

reaffirming a collective identity with the nation. It might have been hard for a single Israelite soldier to connect to the national mission, but by being counted as a member of his family's house, he is reminded of the values that his family transmitted to him and will be inspired to recommit himself to the nation.

Similarly, I have received a set of values from my own family that connects me to the greater narrative of my people and inspires me to continue in their footsteps. My family came to the United States from Lithuania in the 1890s, fleeing from pogroms. Over my mother's chicken soup, my parents told me how my Great Grandpa Morris came by himself to the United States when he was only 13 years old. He came to the U.S. for the promise of a better life, and to be able to practice Judaism in safety and in freedom without fear of violence. Over the years I have also heard my grandfather and father tell stories about their service in WWII and the Yom Kippur War, helping liberate labor camps and defend the State of Israel.

As I think about the narrative of my family, it is clear that the narrative thread is liberation: first liberation from our own oppression, and second, the power and responsibility to liberate others. *Avadim hayinu*, we were slaves, *ve'ata b'nei chorin*, and now we are free, and in our freedom we are charged to free others. Like the Israelites, who learned from their ancestors to take on the responsibility of upholding their nation's values and enacting them in the world, I learned from my own family's history the importance of pursuing freedom for the oppressed.

Since I, like many of us, will likely not be serving in the U.S. military, it is clear that my responsibility to further the Jewish people's narrative of defending the rights of the subjugated must be upheld through other types of service. Today we may not march into battle, but we can sign petitions, participate in letter-writing campaigns and lobby members of Congress. Through these actions, we can continue the work that is our people's heritage and transfer that passion to the next generation. Then we will be able to proudly tell our children and grandchildren stories of the service we did to repair the world in our generation—and hopefully inspire them to do the same in theirs.

My ancestors could not imagine the type of power that we, as American Jews, have today to influence policy, to act as witnesses to injustice and to use our political power to amplify the voices of people whose rights are denied. While our individual families' narratives may differ, when we act as part of the collective Jewish people, our voices are magnified and true change can be achieved.



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