



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Bamidbar 5772

By David Singer

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In the beginning of the book of Bamidbar, Moses is instructed to call together all of the Israelites in the wilderness in order to undertake a census of the people. Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah explains the significance of this census by way of a parable about a man who has a box filled with jewels.¹ From time to time, he would take them out and count them, in order to check that they were safe and intact and to marvel at their beauty. Bamidbar Rabbah teaches that, like the character of this parable, God expresses Divine love for each person through the censuses of the Israelites—counting them and marveling at their beauty.

This message is powerful, with important ramifications for the building of a just society based on equality for all. And yet, its poignancy is marred by the fact that the census accounts only for 600,000 adult men; so evidently missing from the “lovingly counted jewels” is fifty percent of the population—its women.

Many historical and practical reasons can explain the absence of women from the census: Most ancient texts, the Bible included, focus nearly exclusively on the males of a community. In addition, this census was for the purposes of army recruitment, a male-only task in its time. But rationalizing women’s exclusion from the census cannot erase the uncomfortable value judgment on women’s worth that can be derived from the *midrash*, nor does it justify the perpetuation of this exclusion in societies today—from parts of the Jewish community to communities worldwide.

This is especially egregious throughout the Global South, where the wanton suppression of women’s rights and equality continues, either through law or custom—or both. Because of their enforced second-class status in many countries, women remain hidden from society, unable to be counted in their nations’ development.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, women in many developing countries still lack rights to own land and inherit property, obtain access to credit, attend school and earn income in the job market, free from discrimination.² This suppression of women’s rights contributes directly to the high rates of early marriage, lack of education and vulnerability to gender-based violence that exist throughout the Global South. Without basic freedoms, women are left at the whims of society, unable to determine their own fates.

Yet there are many organizations working to reverse this trend. In India, AJWS grantee Girls Rise India³ works to empower women through education and financial support, to enable them to start their own businesses. Similarly, an organization called Shaheen labors to bring equality specifically to women in India’s Muslim population. Its founder, Jameela Nishat, recognized that this sub-group was particularly vulnerable to the ills of disempowerment. Her organization, run by women and girls *for* women and girls, uses an integrated, rights-based approach to support, educate and empower the marginalized women and girls of local Muslim communities to lead lives free from

¹ Bamidbar Rabbah 4:2.

² “Promoting Gender Equality: Political Empowerment,” UNFPA. <http://www.unfpa.org/gender/empowerment3.htm>

³ The name of this organization has been changed to protect its members, who are operating in a highly sensitive environment.

discrimination, violence and poverty. According to Jameela, “If girls are empowered, it spreads education . . . when education spreads, there is the possibility of changing mindsets . . . stopping violence.”⁴

When we support organizations working to empower women, enabling them to raise their voices and express their ideas, we help to enable entirely half of the population in many areas of the Global South to realize their rights and contribute to their nations’ futures. It would serve communities worldwide well to recognize the mistake of excluding half a community from representation, significance and importance. All nations, but in particular those in the developing world, need all the resources they can muster in order to overcome poverty, disease and oppression. When given the chance to take active roles in their communities, women have demonstrated that they are powerful drivers of change.

Parshat Bamidbar teaches us that numbers matter, that each individual has significance. But by excluding women, its message of equality falls short. We must write women into the *midrash*, insisting that their value is included in the total. Each person is a jewel—men and women alike. When they are allowed to shine equally, to be counted together, a mosaic of beautiful stones will shine forth from each land.



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⁴ “Empowering Girls as Agents of Change: A Human Rights-Based Approach to U.S. Development Policy,” *American Jewish World Service*, January 2011, p. 6. Available at http://ajws.org/who_we_are/publications/policy_briefs/empowering_girls_as_agents_of.pdf. This policy paper provides a more complete analysis of women’s empowerment in the Global South.

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