



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Pinchas 5775

By Liora Abrahams-Brosbe

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*Parashat Pinchas* begins with a reference to a plague—a devastating illness that inflicted the people of Israel and wiped out a significant portion of the population. Last year when we read this *parashah*, the news was filled with accounts of the Ebola plague raging in West Africa and the connection felt very poignant. Although Ebola and this biblical plague itself have nothing in common (Ebola is a biological virus that strikes indiscriminately and the Torah’s epidemic was sent by God as retribution for the Israelites’ wrongdoings), I imagine that the survivors of both epidemics experienced similar profound trauma.

I was surprised, then, to see that after the biblical plague concludes, the *parashah* doesn’t dwell on this trauma, but immediately launches into the details of the census of the Israelites. I was struck by the abrupt juxtaposition between the two sections: Why would the Torah follow the plague with something as mundane as a census?

I believe we can gain insight by putting the census—and the plague—in context of the overall narrative of the Jewish people. According to Jacob Milgrom’s commentary in the JPS commentary on the book of Numbers, the plague eradicated the entire generation of original Israelites who left Egypt, leaving only survivors who had never known slavery. These people born in the wilderness are those who will eventually enter the Land of Israel. Viewed in this light, the census is more than just a list of the individuals, families, clans and tribes who emerged from the plague; it marks a significant shift in the collective identity of the people.

With modern plagues today, like Ebola, it is tempting to get lost in the numbers—of cases, of deaths—and miss the human face to this epidemic. But *Parashat Pinchas* reminds us that behind these numbers lies the story of real people.

I recently listened to an audio documentary on NPR with Dr. Kwan Kew Lai, titled “Ebola Diaries.”<sup>1</sup> Although it was heartbreaking to hear her recount stories of individuals and families who suffered from Ebola, it helped to bring the numbers of people who were infected and killed by the illness into focus. With context about the human experience, numbers used for census taking and statistics can be transformed into a narrative of human experience, or peoplehood.

My involvement with AJWS as a Global Justice Fellow from the San Francisco Bay Area has helped me frame an understanding of what the Ebola crisis might mean for the people in the region and what is being done, both effectively and ineffectively, to provide aid.

In September 2014, AJWS President Ruth Messinger met with the members of our fellowship. Ruth’s report on AJWS’s response to the Ebola epidemic was reminiscent of a census taking—a census in which both statistics and peoplehood are distinguished and counted. Instead of simply stating numbers of those infected or dead—

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npr.org/blogs/goatsandsoda/2015/02/12/385528882/the-ebola-diaries-trying-to-heal-patients-you-cant-touch>

numbers that may or may not have been legitimate and that simply propagated the sense of faceless entities aiding faceless victims—Ruth outlined the dangers for the people—the clans and the tribes that make up what is being seen by many as anonymous devastation. In this way, she humanized the account.

Ruth's presentation also revealed that the strategies being implemented by predominately Western health aid workers were not as effective as they could be, because they lacked an understanding of the humanity behind the facts about the disease. Just as the Israelites had a narrative that included their past slavery in Egypt, Liberians and other West Africans have a deep-rooted distrust of Western medical professionals, based on past experience with foreign aid relief efforts. Ruth shared examples of protocols from the well-intentioned medical teams that included efforts to stop ritual burial practices in an effort to curb the spread of the disease. This highlighted for me the importance of understanding a cultural narrative and norms, especially at a time of crisis. With the help of AJWS grantees on the ground, local and trusted leaders were able to bridge the gap between numbers and medical practices and the lived reality and culture of the people, in order to take respectful, informed and effective steps to curb the Ebola virus.

One message of this *parasha* is that after a community experiences a trauma, we must acknowledge and count more than just data. Instead, we must try to understand the unique experiences that make up any collective of individuals, families and groups—and hold space in our minds for the narrative of a people. As the Torah continues this narrative beyond the plague, the census marks a significant point in the Israelites' journey and identifies those who will continue the journey. If we look at this census as more than just an accounting for their numbers, but rather, as a statement about the people's collective identity and experience, it gives us deep insight into how they have survived the trials they faced.

May the work of those aiding the individuals, families and communities infected with Ebola also take a census of the values and cultural norms of the people, so that their narrative can remain intact and lead to healing.



**Liora Abrahams-Brosbe** was a Global Justice Fellow from the San Francisco Bay Area and traveled with the group to Uganda in February 2014, meeting with AJWS grantees working to end gender based violence. Liora is a licensed Marriage Family Therapist and Registered Drama Therapist and has a background in community mental health. She currently works at The Jewish Federation of the East Bay as the Youth and Family Concierge. Liora is a formally trained *maggidah*, a Jewish storyteller and teacher, and has performed and facilitated workshops with a variety of groups. She lives with her family in Berkeley, CA. You can reach her at [liora@jfed.org](mailto:liora@jfed.org).

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e [ajws@ajws.org](mailto:ajws@ajws.org) • [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)