

Dvar Torah, Bamidbar, Numbers 1:1 – 4:20
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Choices in Life

This week we begin reading the Book of Numbers, the fourth book in the Torah. It takes the Israelites from the second year in the Sinai desert through the 39th year to the moment before they cross the Jordan River and enter the promised land of Canaan. The book is a collection of laws and events as the people age and an entire new generation is born. The older generation dies out except for Joshua and Caleb. It begins with a long census covering over three chapters. The census reveals that there are a little over 603,000 males over the age of 20. It excludes women, children, people with disabilities that preclude him from serving as soldiers, and those not considered Israelites. Many commentaries examine the fact that women and those who we might today term illegal or legal aliens are not included and what that means, and the important issue of women's place in the Bible as well as the meaning and definition of gender that is so fiercely debated today.

A census is an important moment of reflection, and as I thought about this parasha, I thought of another meaning of counting: what counts for us. A year ago, I attended my grandson's final concert as a clarinetist in middle school. I remember looking around the auditorium and seeing

multiple generations. There were the students, members of my grandson's generation, and then their parents, our children's generation and the grandparents, a still different generation.

What counts for my grandson's generation as it enters high school and college and with that, hopefully, the opening of so many worlds, the wondrous and challenging world of the mind, the entrancing, troubling, entangling, and loving world of relationships? All the doors are open, all the big decisions still to be made, and there are many choices. What counts for them is openness to human experience both spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional. The world is beckoning to great adventures and possibilities.

And then my son's, our children's, generation; for them, many of the choices are already made, they have children and family and a profession. They are in the middle of their lives; many doors have closed, but many remain open. For the most part they are still physically able, yet far more mature than they were as young adults. It's a wonderful time to be alive. What counts is the ability to use the wisdom and experience of their 40 or 50 years to explore new horizons. To accept life's limitations and disappointments towards a greater awareness of what fulfillment, what a good life, really means.

And then there is our generation. Most of us are retired, many of us have children and grandchildren, and, if getting old brings maturity we must be very mature. So, what counts for those of us at this moment in our lives? In this census, where do we want to be counted?

This is a religious service, so I begin with spirituality in the broadest sense. Whether you believe in a supernatural or natural deity or none, the nature of that belief remains a complex question. Over the past decade we have discussed Jewish spirituality, either as a group or in the presence of some distinguished rabbis. For me and perhaps for many of you, at the core of Jewish spirituality is the quest to find meaning beyond the limitations of our own lives. That is, when we attend Shabbat or High Holiday services, we are seeking something beyond ourselves. Religious services of whatever kind, including secular forms, are efforts to go beyond the ego, whether through a connection to God, however you define God, or through fellowship by taking part in a loving community of equals, where wealth, status and other trappings are nowhere as important as just our presence together, our common support. Over the millennia, humans have yearned for something beyond their finite limitations. For some this is immortality and for others it is a sense of purpose. This is not to belittle individual accomplishments, but to put them in a larger perspective. Judaism allows us as men and women striving to make our relatively short lives

have some greater significance. Seen in that light, it gives greater meaning to our personal achievements as parents and children, as workers and professionals, as friends and lovers. It gives a new meaning to the word “sacred.”

The second theme of what really counts is fellowship. Despite all the issues that come up, there are few things that give our lives meaning than the warmth of family. The same applies to our friends, where would we be without them? On Shabbat these two come together as we join with each other enjoying fellowship and seeking something greater than ourselves. I remember maybe ten years ago Sam Book of blessed memory, gave a talk here where he connected fellowship with worship, that God emerges from our relationships, and that has always stuck with me. As we get older our human connections matter so very much.

The third theme of what counts for people in our generation is the life of the mind. Young students often reject history; they think that they will live forever, death is something far away and not very meaningful. People of our age are sensitive to history and want to know more about it, in many cases our genealogies, because to be part of a continuum that came before and will go on after our years on this planet creates meaning in our life and for some people a sense of immortality. Using

our minds, we can delight in the greatest achievements of mankind in areas such as literature, music, theater, and fine arts. It is a recognition that we as members of humanity, have accomplished so much. The arts ask us the most profound questions about the human condition, take us to places that we could never reach on our own. As we have fewer days, we are anxious to read the books we never got to, travel to historic locations. How much more at this moment can we appreciate a work of Rembrandt or a play by Shakespeare than when we were younger. This is one of the privileges of having leisure. It's just that there isn't enough time, there never is.

The fourth theme of what counts is how to confront the aging process. How do we deal with our bodies as they no longer function as they once did. How do we face emerging disabilities. Is it possible to live a meaningful life when confronted with significant pain and serious illness? I have a feeling that many of us are not very good at this and that includes myself. If we are in physical distress, often that is all we want to do is talk about it. What counts in the challenge of aging, to the extent that it is possible, is to not hyperfocus on what is going wrong. There will be times when that's no longer possible. But when it is possible, to remain a part of our fellowship. What is worse than a conversation where the only thing everyone talks about what's wrong with them? This is a real challenge, a very difficult challenge.

In the end, what counts is life itself. To see the mountains and the flowers, to listen to music that you love, to lose yourself in a wonderful book, to visit a great museum or to spend hours with close friends and family and treasure what a blessing it is to be able to do that. As we age, we appreciate every single day, we appreciate that the sun rises and that the sun sets, and we appreciate each other. Yes, that's what counts, to be grateful for life which is, after all, a religious experience.