

This week we begin Sefer BeMidbar, which literally means “in the wilderness.” This fourth book of the Torah describes the Israelites 40 years of crossing the wilderness. It is aptly called “Numbers” in English, as it begins with a census, and includes list after list: lists of names - names of people and of places; demographic statistics; and schematics of how the Israelite camp should be arranged. Large sections of the book focus on precise blueprints for how the newborn Israelite people should begin to organize itself as a society.

Everything looks very orderly and controlled. But looks can be deceiving! Because when we read the narrative, the Torah’s stories about the events of those years, the picture looks very different. There are rebellions, large and small, and several attempts to overthrow the leadership. We read about challenges to the mission of following God, and of traveling to the Promised Land. In contrast with all of the structures described, BeMidbar presents one example after another of the whole enterprise teetering on the edge, on the edge of chaos.

How relatable we might find this book. In our societies, in our communities and in our personal lives, we establish structures and organization. We make lists, we plan, we imagine that we exercise control over our world. Then real life and real people enter the scene, and we find ourselves in a wilderness. BeMidbar portrays a tension that always exists between our ideals and the complexity and messiness of what actually plays out. We are reminded that life is complicated, always changing, and rarely fully within our control. (And haven’t we learned *that* this past year?) While those facts of life can be frustrating, unsettling and sometimes even terrifying, they also challenge us to think more deeply about things, and to remain flexible and open to different perspectives. So one lesson we might draw from this book of the Torah is that while it is essential to have structures and frameworks in our lives, sometimes what really counts is our ability to adapt to the unexpected, *lizrom* as they say in Israeli slang – to “go with the flow.”

Another lesson of BeMidbar was conveyed in a column this week by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg. Talking about the census counts in this Book of Numbers, Rabbi Greenberg reminds us that when we think about society and groups of people we should never focus *only* on numbers. He points out the dangers throughout history of seeing people as statistics, and not as human beings. This has also been a poignant challenge during this global pandemic, as the mind-boggling tallies of deaths and illness have sometimes made it hard to remember that each of those numbers is a whole person, a person with a story and a family.

I don’t know if Rabbi Greenberg wrote his column after seeing the new Pew report on the state of the American Jewish community, but his comments are relevant to how we read that report as well. For example, by the *numbers*, the report indicates a steep decline in affiliation with non-Orthodox Jewish life. This is certainly a matter of concern. At the same time, we know that on the ground, there is rich Jewish life taking place in our, and many other, non-Orthodox Jewish communities. We know that there are many young people who take their Jewish life very seriously, who may not formally affiliate but who draw from the teachings and values of, for example, Conservative Judaism. And so, as the cliché goes, we should remember to focus not only on quantity but also on quality.

As we begin the book of Numbers this week, tomorrow evening we end the counting of the Omer, and leave those numbers behind. We celebrate the giving of Torah on Shavuot, a

Torah that challenges us to remember what really counts: our ability to stay open to change, to be humble about our powers, and to care for the countless human beings with whom we share our complicated and beautiful world.                      Shabbat Shalom