

***Pinchas: A d'var Torah***  
Numbers 26:52 – 27:23  
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Shabbat Shalom. I hope you all go easy on me because this is my first *d'var Torah* and I did not stay at a Holiday Inn Express last night. But I did do some reading, thinking, and discussing about how best to present *Pinchas* to my fellow congregants. There is a lot happening in this *parashah*. First, this week's Torah portion starts with the name of the portion, Pinchas; one of the very few *parshiyot* named after a person. There's a whole *d'var Torah* right there. Beyond the name, the *parashah* begins with a census, moves to a grant of inheritance to girls, the daughters of Zelophehad, and concludes with the appointment of Joshua as a successor to Moses.

There is a lot I can discuss but since I was only given an hour I had to make some cuts. Wendy, Sarah, and Abigail lobbied hard for me to devote my *d'var Torah* to the inheritance issue, but I am going to weave the threads a bit differently for you this morning. I want to discuss the oneness and the continuity of our people. Caution: existentialism ahead.

For me, it's perfect that *parashah* starts with a census, the second census of our people. I did not choose this Torah portion, but in a way it chose me. For more than half of my life, I have been an amateur genealogist, not so much as a hobby but more so as a mission. I deeply believe that I cannot know who I fully am as a person until I know from whom and from where I have come. I stand on the shoulders of each and every person who has come before me. I also believe that we cannot fully understand who we are as a people unless we know our history. We cannot survive for another 4,000 years unless we commit ourselves as a people, as families, as individuals to not just be Jewish, but to live Jewish. This is my mission for me and for my family. I am not just a decedent, I am also an ancestor.

Here we stand, in *Pinchas*, on the edge of the desert so close to finally entering the Promised Land that you could almost taste the milk and the honey. The wandering is about to end so why another census? Why a census that abruptly follows after God's commandment to seek retribution against the Midyan people for enticing sin and sparking a violent plague?

So much has happened in the last 40 years and most of us have died along the way. Even Moses' days are numbered. This second census comes a generation after the first and even after all the *mishigas* with the wandering, God was going to make a nation out of us in spite of ourselves. The census is an accounting of all the people going in to *Eretz Yisrael*.

But this census is more than a mere counting, it is a standing up and being counted. From God's point of view, I think, this is an enumeration of the people who will become rooted in soil. Literally and metaphorically, they are the roots from which the branches will grow. After 40 years of our *kvetching*, and whining, and insolence, and zealotry for bad causes, God still loves us. He loves us enough to still count us. He loves us enough to want us to count.

From the view of the children of Israel the census is a way of saying *henani* “here I am”; *henanu* “here we are.” A census in the desert helped our forbearers know that they were not alone, that no man is an island, that there is safety in numbers. There is only one way to make it in to the unknown – into a land that ten scouts once told us was too scary to enter – and that is as one community, together. *B’yachad*.

Together we crossed the Sinai and moved across Europe and North Africa. As a community is how we came to America and how we returned to the Promised Land. We have a long history of community because community is not just nice to have, it has been essential for our survival. Our internal support structures sustained us in the European ghettos, we created *landsmanshaftn* in the *goldene medina*, and *kibbutzim* in *Eretz Yisrael*. It is an inherent value in our community to welcome strangers because we too have been strangers.

Forty years ago the first census was for war; it was a draft. *Parashah B’midbar*, Numbers 1:20, says that when the counting was of the first census was completed “every male from twenty years old and upward, all that were able to go forth to war”.

The second census was for prosperity; it was a land grant. The second census was concluded and “the Lord spoke to Moses, saying ‘Among these shall the land be apportioned as shares according to the listed names.’” Here, everyone gets a portion of the Promised Land and together the Promised Land is our portion. I read this plainly and symbolically. We get our portion in Israel, true, but we also each get a share of the covenant that began with Abraham and Sarah, affirmed again by Moses, with Aaron, Miriam, and all of us, *v’kolanu*.

This covenant is our inheritance and our bequest. It is not just on Passover that I feel as if I had personally left Egypt. I feel that when I say the *Sh’ma*, when I recite the mourner’s kaddish, when I join in the *hakafah* on *Simchat Torah*, and when I bless my daughters on Friday nights.

Communities need leaders and there is little doubt that Moses was the right person, in the right place, at the right time. Moses can see the Promised Land but he knows he cannot enter. Rather than turn inward in guilt, frustration, or anger, he turns outward. Moses says to God “Lord, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community...so that [they] may not be like sheep that have no shepherd.” You could devote a whole *d’var Torah* to these three verses, but like said, I only have an hour.

Was Joshua accepted as the community’s new leader? We learn shortly that the answer is yes and we learn this not just in forthcoming *parshiyot*, but in the Book of Joshua on *Simchat Torah*. God said to Joshua “as I was with Moses, so will I be with you...” I like to think that in every generation and in every community, God is with us and will always be with us. I like to think that we are one community wherever we are. Whether we wander in deserts, labor in the fields, work in the cities, or dwell in the suburbs, I hope that we, for the sake of our ancestors and decedents, can live up to the communal sprit that has governed the National of Israel.

Shabbat shalom.