Taking a Census: Thoughts for Parashat Bemidbar, May 15, 2010

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This week's Torah portion focuses on the census of the Israelites taken at the beginning of their second year in the wilderness. The census was important for various reasons. It revealed how many men were of age to serve in the military. It helped determine how to organize the various tribes according to their numbers and needs. It provided a psychological boost to the entire nation when the people realized their numerical strength. It underscored the need for each generation to take a census and to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses.

A census is important not just to provide current information, but to provide data that can be extrapolated into the future. We can project the age distribution of the population, helping us to plan for schools, social services, health care facilities, senior citizen programs etc.

In the year 2000, a major population study was done of the American Jewish community. It gathered information relating to religious affiliation, marriage/intermarriage patterns, number of children per family, level of religious observance etc. Based on the data, some sociologists projected how the Jewish community would look if the current trends were to continue unabated. Here are some of the findings.

For every 100 Jews today who identify themselves as secular, there will be 7 Jews left in four generations. The numbers shrink due to assimilation, intermarriage, small number of children per family, and other factors. For every 100 Jews who identify as Reform, there will be 10 Jews left four generations from now. For every 100 Conservative Jews, there will be 29 Jews in the fourth generation.

For every 100 Centrist Orthodox Jews, there will be 434 Jews in the fourth generation. For every 100 Hassidic/Yeshiva Orthodox Jews, there will be 3,401 Jews.

There is a strong correlation between Jewish population growth and religious observance. The Orthodox are more likely to educate their children in Jewish Day Schools; more likely to live in "Jewish neighborhoods", more likely to marry other Jews, more likely to have larger families.

The picture that emerges is not particularly appealing. Four generations from now, the American Jewish community will be much smaller, much more sectarian, much less involved in general society, much less diverse.

This kind of information is important because it can serve to awaken us to the negative features of current demographic trends. We can work to change negative patterns. The data is descriptive, not prescriptive. American Jewry needs to wake up. We are still strong and vibrant, and we have the intelligence and resources to turn things around.

There are positive developments. More Jewish children are attending Jewish Day Schools. Although the vast majority of these schools are under Orthodox auspices, many schools have been opened by non-Orthodox movements and by non-denominational groups. Thousands of young Jews have gone to Israel with the Birthright program, and have been re-energized in their Jewish identities and commitments. Jewish life is blossoming in various communities, and there has been a resurgence of involvement in synagogues, federations, havurot etc.

Yet, the overall trends are problematic, and pose serious questions about the future of American Jewry. We will not be able to turn things around unless each one of us becomes part of the solution rather than part of the problem. We each need to belong to a synagogue, contribute to our local UJA-Federation, be active in Jewish communal life, contribute our charitable dollars to advance Jewish life. Every time we attend synagogue or a Torah class or a committee meeting, we are voting for a stronger Jewish community. Every child born to a Jewish family is a vote for our future. Every child we enroll in a Jewish Day School is a vote for our future. Every time we stand up proudly as Jews, we cast a vote for our future.

In the quest for a flourishing American Jewish community, we need to make strong commitments and work hard. Will American Jewry rise to the challenge?

***The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (www.jewishideas.org) wishes you a happy Shavuoth Festival. We have confidence in a strong and vibrant American Jewish community, and pray that we will be even stronger and more vibrant in the generations ahead. Together, we can accomplish great things.

Angel for Shabbat